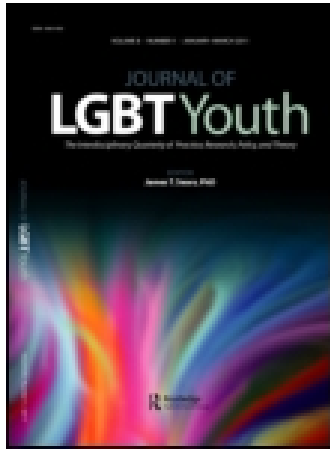


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Wearing a Rainbow Bumper Sticker: Experiential Learning on Homophobia, Heteronormativity, and Heterosexual Privilege

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College campuses are known to be heteronormative environments that often foster heterosexism and homophobia. There is a broad call for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) awareness-building curricula as one avenue for positive change in campus climates. This study interrogates the effects of an experiential learning activity where students were tasked with wearing a rainbow bumper sticker on their person for 24 hours. The aim was to inspire deep learning through self-reflection on experiences of discomfort. Students positively rated the activity for helping them recognize how homophobia influences conformity to heterosexual norms; recognize heterosexual privilege; and empathize with others who hold nonnormative sexual identities.

KEYWORDS *Heteronormativity, heterosexism, homophobia, school climate, students, undergraduates*

It is widely recognized that schools are sites of homophobia, often characterized by discrimination and hate crimes directed at lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students, staff, and faculty (Rankin, 2005). A 2009 National School Climate Survey conducted by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) found that in the United States nearly nine out of 10 LGBTQ students experienced harassment at school in the previous year. In addition, 29% of LGBTQ students in middle or high school missed class due to safety concerns, while double that number (61%) reported that they felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, and 40% said that they felt unsafe due to their gender expression (GLSEN, 2010).

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These environments of harassment and fear have consequences. Aragon, Poteat, Espelage, and Koenig (2014) found that high school students who have been victimized for their LGBTQ identities have lower grade-point averages and lower “educational intentions,” including not expecting to graduate high school or attend a four-year college. While these studies reflect high school climates in the United States, many colleges also have unwelcoming or “chilly” campus climates (Dilley, 2004; Gortmaker & Brown, 2006; Iconis, 2010; Rankin, 2003).

Although some scholarship demonstrates positive (Fine, 2011) or at least improving (Cramer & Ford, 2011) perceptions of campus climates by sexual minority students, there is still a long way to go before schools and colleges are safe and welcoming places for sexual minorities. This is a reflection of wider social dynamics. Academic scholarship on LGBTQ issues in the United States continually highlights the deeply marginalized social position of LGBTQ Americans and the moments of fear and vulnerability that characterize their everyday lives (Girshick, 2008; Katz-Wise & Hyde, 2012; Nardi, 2000; Nussbaum, 2010; Pascoe, 2007). With the rash of gay teen suicides in recent years, much public and scholarly attention has been paid to LGBTQ youth and the tensions they experience in their high school and college lives (Biegel, 2010; Haskell & Burtch, 2010; Parker, 2012). Scholars and media pundits agree that there is a dire need to educate young people and build awareness around LGBTQ issues so that schools and colleges can become less hostile environments.

Part of creating welcoming campus climates is addressing the problem of perceived discrimination. Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, and Azrael (2009) find that perceived discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation contributes to depressive symptomatology among LGBTQ youth, who have significantly higher levels of emotional distress and suicidal ideation. In their study of homophobia and transphobia in high schools, Rebecca Haskell and Brian Burtch (2010) found that their study participants least frequently experienced physical violence as a form of harassment; instead, these individuals predominantly experienced homophobic or transphobic name-calling, avoidance, exclusion, and heterosexual or gender-limiting environments. While school administrators and the media tend to focus on the spectacular forms of bullying, these more subtle and less visible manifestations of oppression are often neglected, though they work to make school environments feel unsafe for LGBTQ youth. Following, Haskell and Burtch found that participants in their study felt the need for self-censorship, which resulted in avoidance of gender nonconformity in an attempt to thwart bullying. A second theme found in their study was the feeling from the study participants that the cause of homophobia in schools is a lack of information about LGBTQ individuals and issues that affect them: “All of the young people we interviewed believed that silence about queer people and the issues

affecting them fueled homophobia and transphobia, which in turn further silences queer youth” (Haskell and Burtch, 2010, p. 71).

HETERONORMATIVITY, HETEROSEXISM, HOMOPHOBIA, AND PRIVILEGE

In a culture of homophobia with a lack of information about LGBTQ youth, fear is often the main hindrance for LGBTQ youth in divulging their sexuality (Biegel, 2010). This can be a fear of losing support, fear of mistreatment, of being thought of as a sexual predator, and of isolation. Thus, LGBTQ identities often emerge silently and secretly. Within the classroom, teachers can add to this fear (Gorski, Davis, & Reiter, 2013; Horvitz, 2011). Many teachers look at a group of students and unconsciously assume that all of them identify as straight. Working from this assumption, teachers can render LGBTQ identities invisible, which LGBTQ students can perceive as a lack of caring and sensitivity. However, something that is not stressed often enough in the literature is that this kind of invisibility is better characterized as a consequence of heteronormativity rather than homophobia. As Airton (2009) articulates, “[H]omophobia is understood to mean the fear or hatred of people who are or who are perceived to be other than heterosexual” (p. 135). A teacher who does not “see” any queer students in the classroom might not have negative feelings toward nonheterosexuals and might not engage in any homophobic behavior or remarks (characterized by fear or hatred). He or she might simply be operating under the heteronormative assumptions that are pervasive in U.S. society, where individuals are presumed to be heterosexual unless they indicate otherwise.

Heteronormativity is the belief that heterosexuality is the natural, normal, and ideal form of sexuality—the way people *should* be. All other forms of sexuality are subordinate and devalued, even though they may be tolerated and even accepted (Steyn & van Zyl, 2009). Heteronormativity fosters systemic disadvantages for nonheterosexuals because it confers every cultural and social advantage on heterosexuality. Many scholars emphasize the more oppressive set of attitudes that stem from heteronormative beliefs: heterosexism (Gorski et al., 2013; Prettyman, 2007; Silverschanz, Cortina, Konik, & Magley, 2008). Heterosexism is an ideology that not only privileges heterosexuality but also actively degrades and punishes any alternative, nonheterosexual constellations of relationships, identities, and behaviors. Heterosexism breeds homophobia, which is the more violent and extreme expression of heterosexism that targets nonheterosexuality for abuse. Homophobia is most often identified in individual acts such as hate crimes. However, scholars such as Perry Silverschanz and colleagues (2008) categorize all homophobic acts under heterosexism, which emphasizes the link between everyday injustices

and more dramatic forms of abuse: “heterosexist acts range from anti-gay epithets to violence to murder. More common, however, are subtle slights and indignities, such as the treatment of same-sex sexuality as invisible” (p. 179). Thus, heterosexist aggressions might take the form of homophobic acts such as violence, but heterosexism, as a pervasive ideology in U.S. society, also creates a wide range of inferior cultural conditions for non-heterosexuals. Heterosexism is encoded into laws (e.g., marriage laws) and other institutional policies; it manifests in popular culture expressions such as music lyrics and Valentine’s Day traditions (Guess, 2011). Thus, while it is appropriate to worry about individual homophobic and heterosexist acts perpetrated on victims, it is important to remember that these acts exist in wider social environments of systemic oppression of nonheterosexuals.

There is widespread agreement that heterosexism in schools and universities could diminish with more inclusive curriculum and pedagogy that pushes both educators and students to critically examine and challenge heteronormativity (Airton, 2009; Eichstedt, 1996; GLSEN, 2012; Horvitz, 2011; Kissen, 2002; Rankin, 2006). Of course, the main goal of such a change is to create safer and more welcoming environments for LGBTQ students, faculty, and staff. However, an instrumental piece of this is to critically address two dynamics of the heterosexual population. The first is for heterosexuals to recognize the ways that they themselves are negatively affected by heterosexism, and the second is to interrogate how heterosexuals benefit from heterosexual privilege.

Sandra Prettyman (2007) stresses the importance of recognizing “the ways in which individual and institutionalized forms of homophobia and heterosexism operate to regulate and police all of our lives, not just those of sexual minorities” (p. 5). Heterosexism and homophobia structure the kinds of interactions we feel comfortable engaging in with members of our own sex as well as those of the other sexes (Cahill & Theilheimer, 1999). It limits and restricts self-expression, particularly gender expression, because gender nonconformity is commonly interpreted (and often misinterpreted) as a signal of queer sexuality, which can have dangerous consequences for nonconforming individuals regardless of their sexual identities. In their study of college students, Silverschanz and colleagues (2008) found that experiencing heterosexist harassment negatively affects heterosexual students as well as LGBTQ students on a host of measures including anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and relationships with instructors.

Paradoxically, at the same time, heterosexism and heteronormativity directly bolster heterosexual privilege, and heterosexual students profit from this privilege in both overt and subtle ways. Like other forms of privilege such as male privilege and White privilege, heterosexual privilege is the systematic garnering of unearned benefits that are conferred on heterosexual individuals. Heterosexual privilege includes a very wide scope of benefits, including legal access to marriage, spousal inheritance, and adoption, as well as social

benefits such as freedom to hold hands with a romantic partner without invoking stigma and having one's sexuality affirmed and positively represented in mass media. For individuals who hold privilege, however, that privilege can be very difficult to see. As Jane Simoni and Karina Walters (2001) state, "[A]lthough most heterosexuals understand that non-heterosexuals in this society are oppressed, they often fail to appreciate the advantages and entitlements that accrue from their own sexual orientation" (p. 167).

For schools to become safe and welcoming environments for members of the LGBTQ community, and for the negative consequences of heterosexism to diminish for all, homophobia, heterosexism, heteronormativity, and heterosexual privilege must all be explicitly addressed and interrogated in students' learning. The pedagogy that is needed moves beyond simple anti-homophobic discourse that focuses on individual acts of aggression (Airton, 2009; Gorski et al., 2013; Macintosh, 2007).

EXISTING LITERATURE ON LGBTQ-INCLUSIVE CURRICULUM

There is a broad call for LGBTQ awareness-building curricula to be implemented in schools and colleges (Fletcher & Russell, 2001; Horvitz, 2011; Kissen, 2002; Sears, 1991; Simoni, 1996). As we have discussed, research demonstrates that exposure to LGBTQ educational content can have positive effects on students' attitudes (Dilley, 2004; GLSEN, 2012; Iverson & Seher, 2014; Newman, 2007) and that sexual minority students desire LGBTQ curricula (Gortmaker & Brown, 2006).

Again, it is important to stress that LGBTQ students are not the only ones who benefit from inclusive curriculum and classroom interventions; majority heterosexual students benefit as well through an expanded understanding of LGBTQ persons and their struggles against homophobia and heterosexism (Biegel, 2010; Guess, 2011; Haskell & Burtch, 2010; Rofes, 2002). Further, heterosexual students can benefit from learning to recognize their own sexual privilege (Simoni & Walters, 2001) and to interrogate the power of heteronormativity in their own lives (Yep, 2002). Such pedagogy is critical because research indicates that increased awareness about both the struggles of sexual minorities and the privileges of the sexual majority can lead to more LGBTQ-welcoming campus environments. For example, based on their review of scholarship on college student attitudes toward sexual minorities, Nancy Evans and Ellen Broido (2005) conclude college campuses that have "affirmative environments and programs that encourage self-exploration, provide opportunities for direct contact between LGB and heterosexual individuals, and combat stereotypes about LGB people can be successful in changing attitudes and helping heterosexual individuals develop LGB-affirming heterosexual identities" (p. 52).

Meanwhile the literature on teaching sociology at the college level continually pushes educators to design opportunities for students to learn about the social world through firsthand experiences (Eichstedt, 1996; Mobley, 2007; Rajaram, 2007; Wright, 2000) and other activities that “sensitize” them to inequities and injustices in their own society (De Welde & Hubbard, 2003; Tiemann, Davis, & Terri, 2006).

Kristen Renn (2000) explains that professors have the ability to open up the possibility of not only helping LGBTQ students get on a path toward self-acceptance but also reducing the heterosexist harassment they face from uninformed or prejudiced peers and faculty members. She argues that the intersection of learning theory and the reality of LGBTQ students’ lives offers ways to reduce victimization and use sexual orientation as a learning experience for everyone. Regarding the development of heterosexuals’ own sexual identities (including recognizing the privilege they hold) Simoni and Walters (2001) stress that information alone can help change attitudes, but it is most effective in tandem with experiential learning.

Our research design was built from Mark Chesler and Ximena Zuniga’s (1991) and Nelta Edwards’s (2010) teaching activities with university students. More than 20 years ago, Chesler and Zuniga asked students to wear a pink triangle button for one day. The pink triangle is the symbol gays and lesbians were required to wear under Nazi rule, but has since become a positive symbol of homosexual identity. Their exercise was “designed to explore students’ attitudes and encounters with homophobia and discrimination against gay males and lesbians” (1991, p. 173). After wearing the pink triangle button, students wrote a two- to three-page paper describing their experiences and together they debriefed and discussed one another’s experiences during the next class meeting.

Edwards’s more recent activity presented students with an opportunity to explore the relationship between gender and homophobia. She tasked her students to find a friend of another gender and to take turns painting each other’s nails and then to wear the nail polish for at least 24 hours. Students were given a set of questions to both answer themselves and to ask of their partner. The activity encouraged student self-reflection. Likewise, Chesler and Zuniga (1991) found that the pink triangle exercise helped their students learn about the implicit and explicit pressures to conform to heteronormative expectations. “It became very clear to students how these pressures work as an instrument of social control, especially control of ‘deviant’ ideas and behaviors, and how their own ignorance or confusion made them even more vulnerable to these pressures” (p. 179). Similarly, Edwards’s nail polish activity was successful in revealing to students their own impulse to conform to gender expectations for fear of ridicule from others. Edwards writes that “students are often unaware of the way that gender expectations are rooted in homophobia and the ways in which their own seemingly harmless and playful teasing about gender-nonconforming behavior contributes

to a context of intolerance” (2010, p. 370). The teaching goals for Edwards’s assignment included deconstructing the relationship between gender and sexuality, as well as empathizing with those who do not have normative sexual or gender identities. “By giving heterosexual students a taste of the fear and hostility under which nonheterosexuals and/or gender nonconformists live, I hope to give them empathy for their nonconformist peers” (p. 367). Her students reported that the assignment did indeed challenge their thinking about gender and homophobia, and more than half agreed it helped them empathize with nonnormative others.

Edwards intended the activity to highlight privilege as well as homophobia, drawing on Eve Sedgwick’s (1988) explanation that heterosexuals have the privilege of “unknowing.” While Chesler and Zuniga (1991) do not engage the concept of privilege directly, it implicitly surfaced in their students’ responses as they grappled with “the fear of being judged” and of being “publicly labeled” or suspected of being gay or lesbian, which is a fear that heterosexuals generally have the privilege of not experiencing.

Both of these assignments are examples of breaching exercises—engaging in unexpected behavior to observe the reactions of others and expose the norms of social behavior. Such pedagogical endeavors underscore the efficacy of experiential learning as a way to assist students in “deep learning” that promotes student growth by addressing “students’ emotional, moral, spiritual, and intellectual concerns and struggles” (Grauerholz, 2001, p. 46). Breaching experiments typically require students to do something that is uncomfortable for them. Pedagogically, discomfort is used as a space for students to learn, self-reflect, and mature (King, Magolda, & Massé, 2011). While wearing a pink triangle (or rainbow bumper sticker, as in our activity) is not a behavior that breaches heterosexual norms in the same way that men wearing nail polish breaches gender norms, it provoked similar discomfort for students. The goal was to have students grapple with their fears and emotions around presenting themselves in a way that might lead others to question their sexuality. This allows students to interrogate everyday conformity to heteronormativity because they are confronted by the possibility of social disapproval. Our intention was to sensitize students to the consequences of privilege, heterosexism, and homophobia, as well as recognize their own role in those dynamics.

METHODS

Our project was conducted in 2012 in an upper-division undergraduate sociology course on sexualities. Our university is a medium-sized, private, independent, Roman Catholic campus, made up of an undergraduate population where 48% of students identify Catholicism as their religious preference. The university’s mission includes cultivating an active faith community, and

students are required to take three theology or religious studies courses to graduate. However, it is not mandatory that any of the courses cover Catholicism in particular. On this campus tolerance for the LGBTQ community is high, but LGBTQ affirmation and acceptance are harder won. A recent campus climate survey revealed that 50% of LGBTQ-identified students claimed they do not feel a sense of belonging on campus, compared to less than 20% of heterosexual-identified students. LGBTQ students also reported a higher frequency of discrimination and negative interactions in classrooms, residence halls, and social events, as well as off campus. Overall, our campus lacks a welcoming atmosphere for members of the LGBTQ community.

The activity asked students to wear a rainbow bumper sticker on their person for 24 hours and to reflect on their experience. We chose the rainbow symbol rather than the pink triangle because it is a more widely used symbol of gay pride today. Students were given the sticker during a Thursday class meeting and were allowed to choose any 24-hour period to wear the sticker between then and the following class meeting on Tuesday. Students were also given a bluebook to use as a reflection journal in which they were asked to answer six open-ended questions throughout the period they wore the sticker. The questions were similar to those in Chesler and Zuniga's (1991) paper assignment and were explicitly drawn from Edwards's (2010) study. Following are some of the questions that were asked:

- What were your first reactions when thinking about wearing the rainbow bumper sticker?
- What did you think when you first saw yourself (in a mirror or photo, etc.) wearing the sticker?
- How did you feel about yourself while wearing it?
- How did others react to your bumper sticker?

Refer to Appendix A for a complete list of reflection questions. Modeling from Edwards's (2010) study, students also completed a questionnaire during the follow-up class meeting on Tuesday where they rated the activity in terms of how well it helped them "recognize how homophobia influences conformity to heterosexual norms and expectations for behavior"; "empathize with people who do not have normative sexual identities"; and, for students who identify as heterosexual, "recognize some of my own heterosexual privilege." These questions were adapted directly from Edwards. Refer to Appendix B for the complete questionnaire. Students anonymously submitted their bluebook reflection journals and questionnaires together that same Tuesday.

This activity was not a required assignment. Like Chesler and Zuniga's (1991) pink triangle activity, participation was voluntary. It was important to the first author, who was the professor for the course, that students were allowed to decline participation without facing any consequences.¹ It could

be potentially damaging to require LGBTQ students on our Catholic campus to wear a rainbow bumper sticker, as such students might experience it as the professor requiring them to “out” themselves. This concern was confirmed by a bisexual participant in the study, Michael (all students’ names have been changed), who wavered over running an errand to the campus bookstore while wearing the sticker. He wrote in his reflection journal: “I try pretty hard to pass as a heterosexual . . . I feel like if I make one false move, they’ll notice and begin to judge me or refrain from engaging in conversation. I don’t want men thinking I am attracted to them, especially if I am. It only creates tension; tension I still don’t know how to buffer.”

To alleviate potential concerns of this nature, the activity was presented as entirely optional. This also fit with the institutional review board’s constraints on the project, because all students at our university are considered a “vulnerable population” by our human subjects board.² Thus, extra caution was appropriate around reassuring students that this opportunity to participate in the research study was completely disconnected from their grade in the course to avoid any semblance of coercion to participate. Students were guaranteed that their reflection journals would not be read by the professor until after the semester was over and grades were submitted. Even though the journals and questionnaires were anonymous, it was emphasized that nothing they disclosed about themselves would have an effect on their academic performance.

Of the 59 students enrolled across two sections of the course, 27 participated. Of those who participated, five identified as homosexual, bisexual, or bi-curious, and one did not identify her sexuality. The entire sample completed reflection journals and 24 of the 27 also completed questionnaires. Our participants included 24 women and three men. The gender ratio of the sample (11.1% male) reflects the larger gender ratio of the course (15.3% male); 50 women and nine men were enrolled. Due to the voluntary nature of the activity and the fact that the recruitment pool was comprised entirely of students who had enrolled themselves in a sexualities course, we can assume that our sample has a selection bias. As the course is not a requirement for any major or minor, it is likely that the students who chose to take such a class were interested in exploring issues such as these. Further, as women are known to be more sympathetic to the harassment of sexual minorities than are men (Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, & Robinson-Keilig, 2004), it is not surprising that more women than men participated in our study. Thus, while our results cannot be widely generalized, they do speak to the “deep learning” that is possible for students who participate in such an activity (Grauerholz, 2001).

When the first author introduced the activity to the class, she demonstrated by peeling the backing off the bumper sticker and adhering it directly across the front of her shirt. The bumper stickers are standard size, 11 inches by 3 inches, and it had a dramatic effect when placed across the front of

the instructor's shirt. Both classes reacted audibly. However, students were told that they could choose where they wanted to wear the sticker both in terms of the location on their person and in which environments; they were not required to wear it in as prominent a place as the front of their shirts. They were asked to select a 24-hour period any time over the following four days (between Thursday and Tuesday class meetings) to wear it, and to attempt to wear it for the entire 24 hours. This also meant that they could choose not to wear it, or only wear it in their own home over the weekend, and so on. As the goal was for students to self-reflect on their feelings around these decisions, it was not strictly required that they wear it publicly. Breaching experiments are intended to have participants do something unexpected and gauge the reactions of others. However, a key aspect of the experience is participants' self-reflection on the discomfort they feel over engaging in the unexpected behavior. While De Welde and Hubbard (2003) and Edwards (2010) might disagree, we contend that contemplation of the behavior and its possible consequences can accomplish deep learning even if the participant feels unable to bring himself or herself to engage in the behavior. As Grauerholz (2001) argues, if an assignment provokes discomfort and self-reflection, it can inspire deep learning.

As the rainbow is widely interpreted as a symbol of LGBTQ pride, students had to cope with the potential that the sticker might signify membership in the LGBTQ community. We fully recognize that wearing a rainbow bumper sticker is not equivalent to actually engaging in a behavior that might publicly mark one as LGBTQ, such as holding hands with or kissing a same-sex partner. However, this breaching activity created the potential for others to question a participating student's sexuality, which offered a glimpse into the everyday realities that LGBTQ individuals face, particularly those whose gender expression does not conform to social expectations. This also set the stage for students to empathize with the experiences of members of the LGBTQ community and for heterosexual students to understand and recognize their own heterosexual privilege, akin to the activities done by Edwards (2010) and Chesler and Zuniga (1991).

DATA AND FINDINGS

As social environments can be heteronormative and even heterosexist without blatant acts of homophobic aggression or violence, it is perhaps not surprising that only two of our 27 participants reported overt encounters with homophobia while wearing the sticker. Lindsay was one who did have such an experience. It happened at her workplace, a junior high afterschool program. She wore the sticker on her shoe. Although Lindsay identified as lesbian, she was not out at work. She wrote in her reflection journal: "The students at my work reacted with shock and disgust. Several remarked to me

that it was unnatural and I sat behind my desk with my boot mostly covered for the duration of my 4 hour shift.”

Erica was the other student to have a negative experience. She wrote: “At first I was a bit scared to wear the bumper sticker because many of my friends are extremely homophobic and I knew I would get flack [*sic*] from them.” Erica wore the sticker all day on her purse, and her anxiety about her friends proved to be warranted: “People I didn’t know just brushed right past me, but people I knew asked why I had it, many times in a very condescending manner.”

While these were the only examples of responses that students identified as homophobic, many students (17 of 27) consistently described fear and anxiety over wearing the sticker because they *expected* to encounter homophobia.

Fear of Homophobia and Heterosexist Harassment

Many of our participants wrote that they were excited and eager to partake in the activity; however, they also expressed nervousness and fear that their sexuality would be in question and they worried how others would respond. One student, Chelsea, wrote a typical comment in her journal: “I feel comfortable with people thinking I support gay/lesbian rights but I do not want to be perceived as lesbian.” She also wrote: “While I wore it, I felt nervous that someone would make fun of me.” Another student, Nick, was also concerned with how he would be perceived and whether he would be treated with homophobic reactions. He wrote: “By wearing the sticker people would think that I was a gay male, which would cause for some of my friends to be uncomfortable around me. I also do not feel like being ridiculed by peers, or catch ‘weird’ looks from people around campus.” Although they did not use the language of heteronormativity or heterosexism, students like Chelsea and Nick clearly recognized their social environments (including our campus) to be heteronormative and heterosexist, where homophobic victimization could occur. Because there is room in a heteronormative environment for tolerance and even acceptance of nonheterosexual identities and behaviors, Chelsea could feel “comfortable” being seen as a supporter of gay and lesbian rights. However, clearly both Chelsea and Nick also believed their environments to be heterosexist and even outright homophobic, as they both expected to be “made fun of” or “ridiculed” if others perceived them as homosexual.

Silverschanz and colleagues (2008) characterize the “ridicule” and “being made fun of” about which Chelsea, Nick, and others expressed fear as “heterosexist harassment” rather than homophobia, in an effort to highlight the more subtle, nonphysical forms this harassment often takes. They define heterosexual harassment as “insensitive verbal and symbolic (but non-assaultive) behaviors that convey animosity toward non-heterosexuality”

(p. 180). The authors distinguish between *ambient* heterosexist harassment, such as the telling of anti-gay jokes that “can be overheard by anyone within earshot,” and *personal* heterosexist harassment, “such as being called a ‘dyke’ to one’s face” (p. 180). Students in our study seemed to be exclusively concerned with personal heterosexist harassment, as their anxiety focused on the possibility that they would be direct targets of ridicule, and they actively sought to avoid this ridicule with the placement of their stickers, as we discuss in the next section. Yet, at the time of the activity, the course had not covered the distinctions between heterosexism, heterosexist harassment, and homophobia, and students’ reflection journals reflected a lack of clarity on the differences among those concepts. They tended to describe anything with a negative bent as “homophobic,” as they had not been exposed to vocabulary that would allow for more nuanced articulation of their experiences.

In addition, students clearly indicated that it was not only harassment they feared. They also expressed deep concern over simply being identified as a member of the LGBTQ community, a devalued identity even when it is tolerated and accepted. Alyssa, a bisexual student, wrote: “I was a little leery about the whole idea because people assume that if you’re wearing rainbows you must be gay.” Some students expressed conflicted feelings, such as Noelle: “One of my best friends is gay so I feel comfortable with the community, but I’m not sure how I will feel when it will look like I am actually part of the community to some people by wearing the sticker. . . I’m not sure why it made me feel weird, but I did. I know 200% that I’m supportive of the LGBTQ community, but I didn’t want anyone to think I was part of it, maybe.” Still others like Heather were both conflicted and concerned about the potential consequences of having their identities “misinterpreted” as LGBTQ. Heather had a strong, visceral reaction when she first starting thinking about wearing the bumper sticker: “I *really* felt light headed due to my irregular pace in breathing. I was so nervous and worried about participating in this research because I believe I owe it to the LGBTQ community to be strong and wear the sticker. On the other hand I was so afraid. I *am* so afraid of how people are going to perceive me. I’m also scared that my religion professor will think less of me and have the negative bias affect my grade.”

In this, our participants’ reactions are strikingly similar to Chesler and Zuniga’s students in 1991. One of their students wrote: “I was horrified: because I wore this button, my teachers, friends, and even strangers might assume that I am a lesbian. It hit me! I was worried, I did not want my image to be shattered because I wore a ‘silly pink button.’ I surprised myself; although I support gay and lesbian rights, the thought of being recognized as a lesbian was horrifying. . . when it came down to it, I would not want to be thought of as one” (p. 176). Chesler and Zuniga argue that this experience of discomfort made the activity “particularly powerful for explorations of

one's own personal feelings and prejudices, public identity, experience with stigma, and fear of discrimination" (p. 176). More than 20 years later, our students had equally powerful self-explorations.

Strategies to Manage the Fear of Homophobia and Heterosexist Harassment

It was an explicit goal of the activity for students to experience the discomfort of acknowledging their own biases and deciding how to proceed. While about half the students (14 out of 27) ultimately leaned in to the discomfort and attempted to wear the sticker boldly, several of those and all of the remaining 13 actively figured out ways to manage the anxiety they felt. These students' employed three main strategies to do so: (1) wearing the sticker in unobtrusive places on their person, (2) wearing it only in safe spaces, and (3) never wearing the sticker at all.

The first two strategies, deciding to wear the sticker only on a discreet location on their body or backpack or only in settings where the student felt safe, are somewhat parallel to the experiences LGBTQ individuals have of choosing to whom and where to be out. Of course, some LGBTQ individuals decide not be out at all, and some students in our study decided not to wear the sticker. This connects directly to heterosexual privilege, because it is a dilemma that members of the straight community never have to consider. In our sample, nearly every student wrestled with the question of where to place the sticker, where they might feel safe wearing it, and to whom they could show it. Some students directly commented on the empathy it inspired in them for sexual minorities, however most (19 out of 27) did not explicitly acknowledge that LGBTQ individuals experience this dilemma daily nor did they explicitly discuss feelings of empathy in their reflection journals.

Chelsea, whom we quoted previously as not wanting be "perceived as lesbian" and who worried about being made fun of, chose to wear the sticker on her back, utilizing the first strategy. Like others who chose a blind spot for the bumper sticker, Chelsea wrote: "I decided on this placement because it would limit my awareness if anyone reacted to the symbol." Students like Chelsea managed their fear of others' negative or potentially homophobic responses by intentionally protecting themselves from having to visibly witness them. Similarly, LGBTQ individuals often have to actively turn a blind eye to others' actions that may seem hurtful or threatening.

Caitlyn used the second strategy to manage her fears of encountering homophobia and heterosexist harassment and wore the sticker only in spaces where she felt safe. Caitlyn wrote: "I always say that it shouldn't matter what people think of you but I found myself caring and worrying about this. I want to wear the sticker but to be honest I am a bit fearful of how I will be perceived. I can only imagine how people who identify as LGBTQ must feel

on a day-to-day basis. It has got to be so hard.” Caitlyn reduced her anxiety by choosing to wear the sticker only in her own home and not physically attaching it to her body: “I ended up putting the sticker on my bag over the weekend because only my roommates would see it and they wouldn’t question me. I am shocked at how nervous/worried I was about doing this because I never feel ashamed for who I am. . . I certainly feel and empathize for people of the LGBTQ community because even imagining a day in their shoes makes me uneasy.”

Unlike, Caitlyn, however, most students did not explicitly acknowledge in their journals that grappling with the decision of where to wear the sticker is parallel to what LGBTQ individuals face in their daily decisions about outing themselves. For example, Chelsea, who wore the sticker on her back to avoid seeing others’ reactions, was also selective about the locations in which she wore the sticker. She wrote: “Once I started thinking more about it, I didn’t want to take the sticker to work because I didn’t want customers or co-workers to ask me about it, and especially not draw attention from management. I feel pretty comfortable wearing the sticker in public and around school, but I’m not sure how to react if someone asks me why I’m wearing the sticker.” Out of the 24-hour period, Chelsea wore the sticker for “about 7 hours” while she was on campus, out to lunch, and at home. She wrote: “When I got home my boyfriend asked why I was wearing it and I told him to guess. He laughed and said, ‘because you’re a fag.’ I still wore the sticker around him and in the house but we both decided that I shouldn’t wear it to the gym because guys at our gym are really hypermasculine and I didn’t want to draw any attention.” Chelsea did not go further with her reasoning; she did not speculate on how LGBTQ individuals might feel in similar situations; nor did she reflect on the privilege she usually enjoys of not having her sexuality subjected to judgment by coworkers, managers, or fellow gym members. However, on the postactivity questionnaire, Chelsea agreed that the activity helped her empathize with people who have non-normative sexualities and she also agreed that it helped her recognize some of her own heterosexual privilege. So there is some evidence the activity provoked this kind of deep learning for Chelsea.

While several students wore the sticker significantly fewer than 24 hours, three students did not ever put the sticker on at all. This is the third strategy students used to manage their fear of homophobia and heterosexist harassment. Nick, who was concerned his friends would “feel uncomfortable” around him and that he would be “ridiculed,” was one, and Morgan was another. Morgan was also one of four students who expressed shame for failure to publicly be an LGBTQ ally in this exercise, though the other three wore the sticker in some capacity. She wrote: “I did not end up wearing the bumper sticker. The fact that I did not wear it says a lot. My reasoning for not wearing the bumper sticker is rooted in what others would think if I wore it. If society didn’t have this stigma towards this symbol I clearly wouldn’t feel

that way, if it was widely accepted. I feel somewhat ashamed at the fact that I did not wear it. . . Hopefully given another opportunity I will be able to stand for what I believe is right.” Morgan recognized her feelings as fear of heterosexism and though she did not articulate it, she clearly felt the same concerns many LGBTQ individuals face about being judged.

Our finding that the fear of homophobia and heterosexist harassment hindered some students' ability to wear the sticker is also consistent with the results of an activity given by De Welde and Hubbard (2003) to a college class in which heterosexual students were instructed to write a coming-out letter to a person of their choice. The authors found that students' emotions sometimes blocked their progress and often reported that it took them hours to write the words, “I am gay ” (p. 78), even though the letter was never to be shared with others. Others reported being unable to write a coming-out letter due to overwhelming feelings of inadequacy, shame, or fear, just as some of the students in our sample were unable to wear the sticker boldly. The fear of heterosexism and homophobia can be paralyzing.

On the other hand, two students in our study expressed disappointment in their journals that they did not have the opportunity to battle heterosexist and homophobic responses. Michelle wore her sticker as brazenly as possible: “I am actually choosing a time to wear it that it might breed the most contention. Upon hearing about the activity I immediately started planning what I might say to people who ask me about it or react to it in a negative way.” After experiencing the day devoid of reactions, she wrote: “ I feel strangely disappointed that no one commented as I was ready to defend my rainbow bumper sticker. But how disappointed can I be that no one yelled homophobic comments at me? ” Michelle circled *Excited*, *Brave*, and *Proud* on the questionnaire to describe how she felt during her experience. She did not express fear or anxiety in any of her responses, unlike the majority of the sample. Most students selected at least one negative word (see Table 1). What we would like to emphasize here is that even unafraid students like Michelle were confident that they would experience direct heterosexist harassment, possibly even homophobic aggression, while wearing the sticker. Only one participant circled the word *Welcomed* to describe her experience. She wrote that she experienced so little reaction that she forgot she was even wearing it on her purse. Retrospectively, she interpreted this to mean that she must have been in LGBTQ-friendly environments all day.

Recognizing Heterosexual Privilege

Our data reveal gradations of students' recognition of heterosexual privilege. As scholarship would predict, not all students who identify as straight were equally able to articulate that they carry heterosexual privilege in their everyday lives. Our LGBTQ-identified participants, on the other hand, addressed

TABLE 1 Summary of Students' Questionnaire Responses

The Bumper Sticker Activity Helped Me to	Strongly Agree (5)	Agree (4)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (2) and Strongly Disagree (1)	<i>M</i>
Think about course concepts (<i>N</i> = 24)	5 (21%)	16 (67%)	3 (12%)	0 (0%)	4.08
Recognize how homophobia influences conformity to heterosexual norms (<i>N</i> = 24)	7 (29%)	13 (54%)	4 (17%)	0 (0%)	4.13
Recognize some of my own heterosexual privilege (<i>N</i> = 19)	8 (42%)	7 (37%)	3 (16%)	1 (5%)	4.11
Empathize with those who have nonnormative sexualities (<i>N</i> = 24)	7 (29%)	12 (50%)	5 (21%)	0 (0%)	4.08

Most Frequently Chosen Words to Describe Feelings (Students Could Select up to Three)	Frequency
Nervous	11 (46%)
Cautious	11 (46%)
Proud	9 (38%)
Judged by others	9 (38%)
Worried	8 (33%)
Excited	5 (21%)
Confident	5 (21%)
Strange	4 (17%)
Brave	4 (17%)

N = 24.

heterosexual privilege more clearly. Even some heterosexual students who expressed shame over worrying about having their sexuality misidentified by others (four of 27) had difficulty acknowledging their heterosexual privilege. Samantha wrote: "I was disappointed in myself for wearing the sticker only on my purse. I wasted an opportunity to advance LGBT rights all because of a silly fear of how people would think of me and if they would treat me differently after seeing me wear a rainbow sticker." Notice that Samantha articulated "how people would think of me" (LGBTQ identity) separately from "if they would treat me differently" (heterosexual harassment). These layers of recognition, unfortunately, did not bring Samantha to discuss in her reflection journal the heterosexual privilege that she enjoys every day (only five of 21 did), even though she clearly recognized its counterpart: LGBTQ stigma and mistreatment.

Of the five heterosexual students who did acknowledge and discuss their heterosexual privilege in their journals, only one student, Michelle,

actually used the word *privilege*. Prior to wearing the sticker, Michelle wrote in her journal: “My concern is that people will ask me if I am a lesbian and I will have a defensive or inarticulate answer for that. I would prefer to remain aloof or unaffected by that mischaracterization because it is just that in my mind, a mischaracterization, and not anything near an insult but faced with someone who may be hostile toward my bumper sticker it may be unfortunately hard for me to resist asserting my heterosexual privilege.” She assumed that, if confronted with heterosexism or homophobia, her impulse would be to reveal her heterosexuality and show that she was not in fact going against the norm. She unambiguously recognized this as a privilege the LGBTQ community does not enjoy.

Another student, Brittany, also recognized her privilege and the parallel experience of wearing the rainbow sticker to that of an LGBTQ individual’s daily experience. In her journal she wrote, “I then began to think about the thousands of people who are lesbian, gay, transgender, or queer, and how they walk around everyday [*sic*] with either a much larger bumper sticker that embodies them, or a bumper sticker that they forever try to keep hidden and try to forget about it.” Brittany seemed to clearly understand that heterosexuals have an unearned advantage in society because they never need to conceal their sexuality.

Similarly, a bisexual student, Dana, acknowledged: “There are some queer folk who don’t need to wear LGBTQ apparel to get noticed or marked as LGBTQ. Sometimes (or all times) their appearance or mannerisms are enough for others to label them as queer. What must it be like for them to live with that constant awareness of other people’s reactions? . . . I’ll have to ask my queer friends what they think about this.” Dana (who wrote that she has just recently begun identifying as bisexual) did not make the distinction between gender nonconformity and queer sexual identity. Nonetheless, her comments make it clear that she recognized it is heterosexual privilege not to have to worry about being labeled as queer. We take these students’ insights as evidence that their awareness of heterosexual privilege and their empathy for LGBTQ persons were heightened through the bumper sticker activity. As summarized in Table 1, students’ responses to the questionnaire offer further evidence.

Conversely, a few students’ journals (four of 27) demonstrated a glaring lack of even implicit recognition of their heterosexual privilege while reflecting on wearing the sticker. For example, Sarah commented: “This was a fun activity and a good way for the closeted gays or lesbians to experience how it would be like if he/she was open about their sexual orientation.” Her comment shows how deeply her heterosexual privilege runs; she saw this as a “good way” for closeted people to get a taste how it might feel to be out but did not discuss that she has the privilege everyday of not having to out herself as straight and not having to determine which environments are safe for her to be straight. However, she agreed on the questionnaire that the

activity helped her to recognize some of her own heterosexual privilege. Thus, perhaps for students like Sarah, thinking about privilege does not come naturally, but when a direct question on it is asked some self-reflection occurs. Based on the results of the questionnaire (see Table 1), for heterosexual students in our sample, this seems to be the case.

Another way that unacknowledged heterosexual privilege came through in students' journals was in their interpretation of the "curious" looks they received while wearing the sticker. They seemed unaware that attracting attention might be experienced as threatening to a member of the LGBTQ community. Instead, these students wrote off the stares as benign. In a typical response, Sarah wrote: "I did not see any weird looks. More than anything, people looked curious." Sarah's response stands in sharp contrast to other students who recognized the potential distress of attracting attention with the sticker. For example, Caitlyn wrote: "I wish the sticker wasn't so big. A part of me wished it would be a button/pin that I could wear because it would attract less attention to me." Meghan commented: "When I first saw myself in the mirror I thought—oh wow—*how bright!*" Also, Alyssa, a bisexual student, wrote: "Wow, that's an awfully big sticker. There'll be no hiding that!"

Effective Student Learning

While we have highlighted the lack of students' awareness of the parallels to the everyday decisions that LGBTQ individuals face regarding whether and to whom to be out, in fact we believe the activity was successful overall. Of the participants who identified as straight, 79% either agreed or strongly agreed that the activity helped them recognize some of their own heterosexual privilege, and 79% of the entire sample agreed or strongly agreed that it helped them empathize with people who do not have normative sexual identities. In addition, 83% agreed or strongly agreed that it helped them recognize how homophobia influences conformity to heterosexual norms.

We suggest that breaching activities embedded in course curricula on sexual diversity can potentially bring about positive changes in campus climates by sensitizing majority students to the effects of heteronormativity, heterosexism, homophobia, and heterosexual privilege. Students like Shannon showed evidence of this sensitizing: "I found myself asking myself why I cared so much about what people think and why my sexuality was so important to me. It is easy to learn things in the classroom, but now that I have begun to participate in this study, I am reflecting on LGBTQ in a much deeper way. . . I am embarrassed to share this, yet even after all of the information I have learned as to why and how homosexuals should be treated equally, I felt hesitant to associate with the LGBT rainbow sticker—almost as if I didn't want my sexual orientation to be mistaken. It took me three

days before I actually put it on my purse.” This is precisely the kind of deep learning that breaching exercises can provoke.

Another student, Kelli, commented on the value of the activity: “I felt as though I was not even looked at funny on campus. This makes me confident that in one area homosexuals can feel comfortable on campus. However, since I am not a homosexual I cannot relate to how they feel. This is the problem. We try and put ourselves in someone else’s shoes, but we do not know exactly how they feel.” By inspiring empathy and deep learning, an activity such as this one has the potential to build awareness and ignite positive change in students’ personal attitudes and actions.

LGBTQ-identified students who participated likewise benefited from the bumper sticker activity. Deep learning for them was also rooted in the discomfort they experienced. For example, Alyssa explained in her journal, “I actually am bi, but I’ve told less than five people and it’s not something I necessarily want a lot of people knowing. It’s a very secretive part of my identity and I’m not sure I’ll ever be comfortable enough to express it openly.” Like some of her straight classmates, Alyssa expressed disappointment in herself for not being more brave with the sticker: “I decided to wear it though because I figured if anyone asked about it I could just explain it’s for a class project. People are understanding of things like that. I do feel somewhat cowardly for thinking this way though.” Participating in this activity pushed Alyssa to confront some of her feelings about her sexual identity.

Michael, the bisexual student who wrote that he tries hard to “pass as a heterosexual,” wrote:

I feel I owe it to myself to follow through with this study. My feelings about passing are seldom talked about. Don’t get me wrong, I am proud to be who I am. I have outed myself with clothes and symbols before. I just have a fear of embodying the stereotypical gay/bisexual male. But I won’t hide the sticker, I want it where everyone can see it. I need to be okay with this.

His day wearing the sticker began with a great deal of anxiety that transformed slowly into confidence. “By the end of the day I was completely content wearing the sticker, even as I worked in a coffee shop full of strangers,” he wrote. Participating in this activity was a catalyst for self-reflection and personal growth that Michael acknowledged he often avoids:

Wearing the sticker has definitely made me think about things I don’t usually like to think about. I realize now that I have a lot of fear surrounding the display of my sexuality, whether it be a sticker or a slight deviation in gender expression. I need to think more about how I wish to be perceived and why.

This activity offered Michael a vehicle for a greater sense of acceptance and confidence, just as Renn (2000) asserts is possible with LGBTQ-inclusive pedagogy. The deep learning inspired here involves both the ability to recognize the ways that we are constrained by heteronormativity and heterosexism in our everyday behaviors (such as choosing what to wear) and also the ability to evaluate our own emotional and behavioral responses to those constraints. Michael's comments are evidence that this deep learning also occurred for nonheterosexual students in our sample, even though the activity might seem oriented primarily toward heterosexual students.

CONCLUSION

In sum, our findings suggest that experiential learning such as breaching activities can be part of curricular efforts to foster a more welcoming campus climate for LGBTQ students, even on a campus like ours where LGBTQ acceptance is not the norm. Such activities accomplish this by (1) promoting deep learning through self-exploration that inspires personal growth, (2) sensitizing students to the negative effects of heteronormativity and heterosexist environments, (3) helping heterosexual students more clearly recognize how they benefit from heterosexual privilege in their everyday lives, and (4) expanding knowledge and understanding of the social and political marginalization LGBTQ Americans endure. We know that sexual minority students struggle for acceptance on campuses and it affects their academic performance as well as their successful integration into the campus community (Gorski et al., 2013; Iconis, 2010). With curriculum that provides opportunities to empathize with the LGBTQ experience, campus climates can become more welcoming.

A serious shortcoming of this activity was that only five out of 21 heterosexual student participants acknowledged their heterosexual privilege in their reflection journals. We suggest that this dynamic might be improved in future uses of the bumper sticker activity by having an explicit in-class discussion of heterosexual privilege both prior to the activity and immediately on the heels of students wearing the sticker. This would also be an ideal time to expose students to the vocabulary of heteronormativity, heterosexism, heterosexist harassment, and homophobia, as well as the nuanced distinctions among those terms. The instructor might present data from our study to preface the activity and illustrate the kinds of feelings and interactions students might expect to have. In a postactivity discussion, students could be encouraged to draw on their personal experiences wearing the bumper sticker (or contemplating wearing it) to help explain and give examples of each of the concepts. The instructor might also assign a follow-up essay responding to a prompt, for examples, "Explain how heterosexual privilege works and offer at least one example of how a heterosexual person benefits

from it in everyday life.” Such an assignment would allow the instructor to more clearly assess students’ ability to identify heterosexual privilege and their understanding of how it shapes social life.

Our most dramatic finding is that while very few of the students had any encounters that they perceived to be direct homophobia (which we might characterize as heterosexist harassment) while they were wearing the sticker, 17 (71%) reported feeling either nervous, cautious, or both. In addition, 14 (58%) reported feeling worried or judged by others. Their anxiety was so strong that three participants felt unable to wear the sticker at all, and four students reported feelings of shame over not being able to “stand up as an ally” of the LGBTQ community by wearing the sticker more assertively. This demonstrates a clear recognition on students’ parts that they navigate heterosexist environments daily. If the goal is to see all campus environments become more welcoming to members of the LGBTQ community, this kind of recognition is a critical first step.

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NOTES

1. The second author is an undergraduate student researcher who joined the project after data were collected.

2. Written consent was obtained from participants in class after the activity was explained in detail and the bumper stickers and bluebooks were distributed to students. Every student filled out and submitted a consent form, privately selecting to participate or decline. Those who declined were free to keep the sticker and bluebook to help preserve confidentiality of whether or not they participated.

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APPENDIX A: REFLECTION JOURNAL QUESTIONS

1. What were your first reactions thinking about wearing a rainbow bumper sticker?
2. Where did you put the sticker? Why? How long did it take you to choose that place?
3. What did you think when you first saw yourself (in a mirror or photo, etc.) wearing the sticker?
4. How did you feel about yourself while wearing it?
5. How did others react to your bumper sticker?
6. How long did you wear the bumper sticker? If you moved it around or covered it or removed it completely, what influenced your decision to do so?

APPENDIX B: QUESTIONNAIRE

Please circle answers.

The bumper sticker activity helped me to:

1. Think about the concepts learned in this course
 - a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neither disagree nor agree
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree
2. Recognize how homophobia influences conformity to heterosexual norms and expectations for behavior
 - a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neither disagree nor agree
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree
3. Empathize with people who do not have normative sexual identities, e.g. homosexuals, bisexuals, and transsexuals
 - a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neither disagree nor agree
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree
4. Recognize some of my own heterosexual privilege
 - a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neither disagree nor agree
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly agree
 - f. Not applicable (I do not identify as heterosexual)
5. I identify as (select all that apply):
 - a. Straight
 - b. Str8
 - c. Bi-curious
 - d. Bisexual
 - e. Gay or lesbian
 - f. Pansexual
 - g. Asexual
 - h. Queer
 - i. Questioning
 - j. Transgender
 - k. Transsexual

1. Answering this question honestly makes me uncomfortable
6. Please select THREE words that best describe how you felt during your experience with the bumper sticker activity

Nervous

Excited

Scared

Cautious

Brave

Judged by others

Shunned

Welcomed

Proud

Confident

Worried

Strange

Comfortable

Happy

Unhappy

Please feel free to share any other information about the activity in the space below.