Turning Theory into Practice: An Application of Queer Family Theory for Graduate Students

Shawn N. Mendez  
*California Institute of Integral Studies, smendez@ciis.edu*

Samuel H. Allen  
*The Family Institute at Northwestern University, sallen@family-institute.org*

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Author Note: Both authors contributed equally to this manuscript. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to both authors by email: Shawn Mendez at smendez@ciis.edu and Sam Allen at sallen@family-institute.org

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Introduction

Queer theory (e.g., Jagose, 1996; Warner, 1993) is a central component of graduate school curricula across the humanities and, increasingly, the social sciences (Browne & Nash, 2010). However, graduate students can express resistance to learning queer theory, often critiquing it as a theory that lacks applicability, practicality, or relevance (Allen, 2022; McGuire, 2022; Oswald, et al., 2009). Further, though queer theory has extended far beyond its disciplinary origins in gender and sexuality studies over the past two decades (e.g., family science; Oswald et al., 2005), there remains a dearth of practical pedagogical tools to help graduate students learn queer theory and, importantly, few tools to help their instructors teach it.

To address this need, we devised an original teaching activity intended for instructors of graduate students. We are university faculty who designed this three-part assignment in the context of semester-long courses that have at least some synchronous class meetings. This three-part activity focuses on The Hegemonic Heteronormativity (HH) model, which we introduced in 2018 as an expansion of a queer theoretical model proposed by Oswald and colleagues in 2005 (Allen & Mendez, 2018). The HH model defines heteronormativity as a pervasive, three-pronged hegemony, each of which shifts and changes intersectionally and over time. We (2018) assert that heteronormativity shifted to include cis-, mono-, and homonormativity, and must always be examined within both sociopolitical and temporal contexts. The model is relevant to a wide variety of social science courses and disciplines because it: (1) considers gender, sexuality, family, race, ethnicity, class, ability, nationality, and time as integral to understanding lived experience; (2) allows for the theorizing of privilege as well as oppression; and (3) accounts for individual, familial, relational, institutional, and historical change. The model, though inspired by Oswald & colleagues’ (2005) model, was informed by queer (Jagose, 1996; Warner, 1993), feminist (Collins, 2009), intersectional (Crenshaw, 1991), and life course theoretical perspectives (Roy & Settersten, 2022). We use those same theories to guide the pedagogical application of the model here.

Learning Objectives

Graduate students will be able to:

- Identify and describe the link between gender, sexuality, and family.
Articulate the inextricable link between gender, sexuality, family, and other social locations (e.g., race, nationality, ability).

Demonstrate how social structures and corresponding social locations relate to both privilege and oppression.

Identify and describe the significance of change over time as it relates to hegemonic power structures.

Apply the HH model to specific populations, research studies, and/or clinical case examples.

Explanation

We designed this three-part assignment to be used by instructors of graduate students in courses that have at least some synchronous course meetings. The overall goals of this assignment are to effectively teach a model of queer theory to graduate students and to help graduate students apply queer theory to various disciplines. The assignment has three parts: one that occurs before class, one that occurs during class, and one that occurs after class. This three-part structure is intended to maximize students’ interaction with queer theory, and we encourage instructors to use all three parts. However, instructors may also incorporate whichever part(s) will best respond to the needs of their course, the needs of their students, and/or structural limitations (e.g., time or scheduling constraints, size of the class, etc.).

PART I: Before Class

The pre-class segment of the assignment entails reading and reading comprehension, the second of which can be assessed via annotated summaries. We assign only two readings for Part I: the first, Oswald and colleagues’ “Decentering Heteronormativity” chapter from the 2005 Sourcebook of Family Theory and Methods; and the second, Allen & Mendez’s HH model, which was published in Journal of Family Theory & Review (2018). We recommend not assigning any other readings to encourage students’ depth of understanding and comprehension of the material. Make sure students understand that they should read Oswald and colleagues’ chapter before Allen and Mendez’s article.

If desired, instructors can require students to submit an annotated bibliography or summary of the two articles before the beginning of the synchronous class session (Part II), to both buttress their comprehension of the reading and to offer the instructor an avenue to gauge their level of comprehension before in the in-class portion. For instructors who require a reading comprehension check before class, consider asking students to respond to the following prompts:
(1) Summarize the main tenets and assumptions of Oswald and colleagues’ (2005) chapter.

(2) After reading Oswald and colleagues’ (2005) chapter but before reading Allen & Mendez’s (2018) paper, what strengths do you observe in the Oswald, et al model? What critiques and/or shortcomings, if any, can you identify?

(3) Summarize the main tenets and assumptions of the Allen & Mendez (2018) article.

**PART II: During Class**

The in-class portion of the assignment has instructors review the HH model with students and address their questions before a low-stakes in-class application activity. First, instructors should summarize the HH model in a short lecture, including a comparison to the Oswald and colleagues’ (2005) model (please contact the authors for slides and other materials). During the in-class review, it is important to: (1) define the terms hegemony and heteronormativity, (2) delineate the three axes and their corresponding poles, (3) discuss the five contextual spheres, and (4) define the two ways that time is utilized in the model (i.e., developmental and historical). Here, we clarify six common points of confusion about of the HH model (Allen & Mendez, 2018) that we have encountered when doing this review lecture with students:

1. The terms “norms” and “normative” are never intended to reference a statistical “norm,” in the sense of describing a central tendency or what might be considered “normal” in a clinical sense. Rather, we are referring to a sociological norm, in that something is “normative” when most people hold it as a value or moral standard (Wade, 2016).

2. We believe heteronormativity is a dynamic process: it has already changed, and it will keep changing over time. However, shifts in heteronormativity do not result in the elimination of power imbalance and inequities. Indeed, while these shifts have resulted in progress for some (e.g., monogamous, cisgender, married gays and lesbians), they have simultaneously excluded groups of people—those with other gender, sexuality, and family identities—from the same social and political capital.

3. Our placement of socially recognized trans persons on the “normative” pole of the gender axis does not imply that being trans is easy or that being trans is widely socially accepted. It merely suggests that those trans people who are socially recognized—and thus affirmed—in their gender have the potential to access some of the privileges that other trans folks cannot (Bradford & Catalpa, 2019).
4. The list of contextual spheres is not, by any means, exhaustive. Further, the five spheres represented in the model were not written in order of “importance” or regarding any other hierarchy.

5. When trying to place an individual within the model, we encourage students to envision the model three dimensionally. For example, we often invite students to imagine placing a black dot or small marble in the model such that placing the dot at a point on the gender axis would simultaneously place that dot somewhere on the other axes, within the spheres, and in a particular place in time.

6. Emphasize the multifaceted, inexorable, and integral nature of time in the HH model; namely, that failing to consider time—both what is occurring in the current moment and what has changed over time—fails to understand the lived experience of any gender, sexuality, or family adequately or accurately.

The review should take approximately 20-40 minutes, including a few minutes to address any questions or points of clarification that arise. We encourage instructors to use the rest of the class period for an in-class application activity. The goal of the application activity is to assess students' ability to apply the model to a real-world example in preparation for the take-home portion of the assignment (Part III). For the in-class activity, instructors present students with an example of their choice, then have students answer questions independently before discussing the answers with the class.

Choose an example that is well suited to your content area or the needs of your course. We suggest the HBO documentary, The Trans List, in which 11 trans-identified persons share their life story. We suggest this documentary both for its craftful display of intersectionality as well as its focus on life stories and lived experience, which make it well-suited for varied disciplines across the humanities and social sciences. We challenge students to compare two individuals interviewed in the documentary using the HH model. We suggest comparing Miss Major (an older, Black, trans woman) and Nicole Maines (a young, White, trans woman), but any of the interviewees can be used. We recognize that not all instructors or institutions have access to HBO, and that a trans-specific documentary may not be ideal for all courses. Vignettes and case descriptions are also a wonderful prompt for this activity. You can create your own; you can also have students create their own. Here are some other videos that are available on YouTube or are otherwise free to use:

- Oprah’s Master Class mini biographies of celebrities
- Biography Channel biographies
- Transmormon, 14-minute documentary on a transwoman from rural Utah
- Maysoon Zayid’s Ted Talk: I got 99 problems...Palsy is just one of them.
We recommend choosing an example that students can watch or read in 15 minutes or less. Note that the example does not need to address every aspect of the model clearly or neatly—this allows for more, and often a richer, discussion.

For the application activity, give each student a physical copy of the HH model (Figure 1 in Allen & Mendez, 2018, p. 74), with the following instructions:

As you watch each person tell their story, take notes to help you answer the following questions: (1) Where does each person fit in the model (axes, spheres)? (2) How do their social locations privilege and hinder them in life? (3) How might these individuals’ experiences be influenced by time?

After students have read or watched the example, allow them 10-20 minutes to answer the questions individually. In the final portion of the in-class activity (Part II), review the answers as a group. Please note that the review portion is crucial to student learning: it allows students to ask any lingering questions about the model and for instructors to respond to them before students conduct a similar but more complicated exercise on their own (Part III).

**PART III: After Class**

The final segment of this assignment occurs after the synchronous class session and is dedicated to application. It is through this segment of the assignment that students make queer theory practical to their specific content areas, areas of study, and/or areas of expertise. We offer two “tracks” for this segment and encourage instructors to select the one that more closely reflects their course learning objectives.

The first track is intended for research-focused graduate programs (e.g., PhD programs in sociology, human development & family science, etc.) or for instructors who wish to focus their pedagogical application of queer theory to the research process. Instructors who choose this track will select an empirical article relevant to the course or discipline (or allow each student to select an article on their specific area of interest or expertise); some sample articles include Francisco (2021), Ocampo (2014), and McGraw and colleagues (2023). Then, have students compose a critique of the article using Allen & Mendez’s (2018) framework as a guide. Below is an example prompt for this track:

In 2-3 pages, analyze and reframe the study you selected using the Hegemonic Heteronormativity model (see Allen & Mendez, 2018, p. 78-79 for an example). Your critique of the article must: (1) provide an overall summary of the article including the stated research question(s), sample, and theoretical and methodological approaches; (2) identify strengths and weaknesses of the authors’ methodologies; and (3) describe how using the HH model would
address the weaknesses you identify and/or improve the authors’ analyses.

The second track, which we refer to as the “clinical track,” is designed for clinically focused graduate programs that are training students to become clinicians and/or licensed mental health providers (e.g., LCPC, LCSW, LMFT, LMHC, LP, etc.). Instructors who choose this track will provide students with a detailed case description (instructors may choose to provide the same description to the entire class or different ones to each student). The assignment asks students to consider how different aspects of social identity intersect to contribute to the client’s presenting problem, specifically, and lived their experience more broadly. Below is an example prompt for this track:

In 2-3 pages, analyze the case description using the Hegemonic Heteronormativity model (Allen & Mendez, 2018). Your assessment must: (1) develop hypotheses about the client and their presenting problem; (2) include a list of questions you might ask during an assessment with the client; and (3) justify both your hypotheses and your questions using the HH model.

Assessment

Instructors can choose whether to grade the reading comprehension assignment in Part I (if used), though we recommend that the in-class portion of the assignment (Part II) be ungraded. This allows students to take notes and edit their responses during the class-wide discussion and use these notes to assist them as they complete Part III. If instructors decide to grade the in-class portion in Part II or annotated notes from Part I, we encourage the use of low-stakes or pass-fail grading methods to incentivize and reward students’ initial attempts to grasp queer theory. The at-home portion in Part III should be graded. The evaluation criteria below focus on the accurate application of the HH model including axes, spheres, and time, as well as assessing for the aforementioned learning objectives.

We suggest instructors use the following criteria to evaluate students’ work in Part III:

● Considers gender, sexuality, family, race, ethnicity, class, ability, nationality, and time as integral to understanding the research or clinical example.
● Identifies and describes individual, familial, relational, institutional, and/or historical change as it relates to the example.
● Demonstrates an understanding of social structures and their influence over individual agency, identity, and behavior.
- Describes how social structures and social locations relate to both privilege and oppression in the given example.
- Articulates the connections between privilege, oppression, context, and time.

Although we hope that instructors will utilize all three parts of the assignment, we have intentionally designed the assignment to be adaptable to structural/time constraints, student needs, and course goals with the hope that instructors (and their graduate students) find this assignment useful in applying queer theory in courses across disciplines. We have used this assignment in multiple courses, both in person and online, and each iteration is different. As instructors are considering and using this assignment in their courses, we welcome questions and requests for materials.
References


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