

”Straight Ally” is an Oxymoron

RAD Content Library

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What does it mean to be an Ally? In political spaces that address social issues and systems, this term refers to someone who lends support to a cause without belonging to the group of people it most directly affects. For example, white folks can be allies in movements by and for people of color against white supremacy; cis men can be allies in conversations about healthcare for non-men; people living in homes can be allies by supporting fair and free housing for all. An Ally, or the performance of this role – “Allyship” – goes beyond just acknowledging the cause or stating your support for it. Allyship is to listen and learn from movement leaders (intentionally centered voices), integrate that knowledge into how you navigate the world, and leverage your privileges and resources to support individuals and their movement. An Ally does not take over the space or speak for marginalized people, but rather works to propel their movement forward as an accomplice to the cause.

Now, what does it mean to be Straight? Most would say it’s simply sexual attraction to the opposite sex or gender. They claim it is innate, similar to the “Born this Way” argument from the mainstream LGBT lobby, and one of the factors that makes up someone’s personal identity. However, this definition is based on many layers of socially-constructed oppression that harm Queer people and causes. Once these layers are unpacked and dissected, “Straightness” is revealed as the harmful social construction that it is.

First: sexual attraction. What is sex? When not upholding penetrative PIV intercourse as the singular definition of sex, where does any other form of touch end and “sex” begin? Sex is not real. Rather, it is a socially constructed category aimed to control our behaviors and desires, to classify our wants into “sexual” and “not sexual,” to induce moral panic over whether acts are “appropriate,” and ultimately predominate the way we perceive and interact with all other individuals. Classifying people based on this definition, primarily by adopting a sexuality/sexual orientation label, is a way of projecting how we will or will not interact with other people based on their (presumed, assigned) sex or gender category. You may think: “But what if it’s just my personal preference?” How would you know? Raised in a society that promotes sexuality as a core feature of identity (and specifically heterosexuality as normal, natural, ideal), you have been conditioned to ascertain how your desires fit into categories of “sexual” and towards which “type(s)” of people those desires are directed. Even the mainstream LGBT agenda pushes this narrative: people “are” or “are not” part of one of these named identity groups, and know based on their feelings of attraction (meaning: perceived desire for “sex” with named categories of

others). If instead we neutralize sex by distilling it into specific acts or behaviors that create joy, build community, or indeed serve any purpose, it is clear why there is no need to categorize what we do with other people as “sex” or “not sex,” and no benefit to centering our identity around who may inspire our interest in a particular activity at any one time. Promoting sexuality as identity is a way to control us: instead of pursuing our desires freely, our wants and needs become character traits that can be assigned moral or amoral qualities that are used to justify oppression or marginalization.

Next is the piece about “opposite sex or gender.” There is plenty of writing on this already and, assuming you, the reader, are already at least sympathetic to mainstream LGBT causes, I hope you have already reached the conclusion that gender is a social construct, based largely on appearance and role performance, and shouldn’t limit how people are able to move through the world. Whether people are assigned male or female at birth, they should have the right to self-determination and all the same possibilities of the other group. To claim attraction to an “opposite” sex or gender (and, in doing so, fit yourself into one of these groups as well) reinforces the artificial binary of both these things and pre-determines what you will or won’t do with someone based on your perception of their sex, gender presentation, gender role, or any other number of things that may fit some part of an established sex or gender category. Heterosexuality is built on a presupposed gender system — whether strictly XY-testosterone-male/XX-estrogen-female or even the socially-conditioned/constructed masculine and feminine — which by default marginalizes all sex and gender nonconformity. Just as with “sex,” these categories themselves limit our individual expression, self-perception, and modes of relating to others as normal/natural — or the opposite. To promote your (perceived) alignment of sex, sex assigned to you at birth, gendered features of your appearance/style, and social role by identifying as Straight plays a direct role in marginalizing gender non-conforming people and upholding the gender system that limits our collective freedom. One way to subvert these extant, imposed, policed categories in our everyday lives, and move towards abolition of not only the harms but the categories themselves, is to refuse to perform or tolerate the prejudices associated with sex and gender categories (especially the predominant binary system).

The third component of adopting Straight as an identity label is that it is innate. “Some people are Straight, some people are gay, and all of them are just born that way.” However, the society we are raised in influences all of our thoughts and preferences. Mass media and dominant social hierarchies influence our ideas about who is attractive (desirability politics: thin, able-bodied, young, etc.), what categories of “race” exist (and associated values within White Supremacy), and what types of work are valuable (under Capitalism). Similarly, we are also raised — and continue to operate — in a Straight supremacist society that pushes ideals of Straightness onto all of us. Even in homosexual dyadic relationships (“couples”), individuals are asked whether they are the “man” or “woman” in the relationship — and likely feel pressure to adapt to these roles in some ways. Again, see how gender roles feed into the very notion of heterosexuality: there must be a “natural” balance of these roles/spirits/bodies/energies, and what could be queerness instead reproduces the form of Straight coupledness. What you think you want under Straight supremacy is a distorted version of what has been fed to you for much of your development. Even if you do not perceive pressure from social expectations of Straightness and consider heterosexual dyadic pairing to be your personal preference, consider how this harms all others still suffering under this System. Other privileges that surely shielded you from related trauma are not the reality for all, and refusing to acknowledge this maintains a society in which those with the most privilege

are free to flirt with transgressing (some) social norms while the rest of us are condemned to permanent degenerate status. By living within and the dominant Straight narrative, you limit not only your imagination and tools to create anti-oppressive and anti-coercive relationships, but the ability of others to envision and co-create that better world with you. Promoting the dominant hegemony raises the costs for anyone trying to break away from that System, especially those who do not yet see its direct harms.

Beyond just the harms implicit in the basic definition of Straight, I invite you to consider some additional unspoken societal assumptions that come with it. Of primary import is the tacit acceptance of the Relationship Escalator: a set of default steps that describe increasing intimacy between two people, following the format of a “couple” and culminating in marriage (or at least the de facto marriage-esque bundling of finances, housing, other friendships/relationships, routines, expectations, future goals, etc.). The Relationship Escalator, the dominant hegemonic narrative of Monogamism – the oppressive system reinforcing/supporting monogamy and marginalizing all other intimacies and erotic energies – forces all our interpersonal interactions through a lens that prioritizes couples over community and sexual interactions over non-sexual ones. This model is not exclusive to Straight people (see the mainstream push to legalize gay marriage, for example); however, the organization of society into Straight couples that reproduce nuclear family units is the model at the top of this hierarchy. Organizing society in this way disrupts many of our possibilities for authentic, fluid, liberatory relating. The Relationship Escalator, like all other oppressive systems, rewards Straightness and punishes or silences expressions of self that do not fit those norms. Relationship goals are predicated on the model of the heterosexual nuclear family, a coercive structure that destroys Queer communities and individual would-be Queers.

Identifying as Straight communicates that the way you present yourself to others – and the way you want to be perceived – is as someone who prioritizes strict categories of sex/gender and how those affect your sexual (again, whatever that means) desires and/or behaviors above everything else in how you relate to other people. This is intertwined with the Relationship Escalator, as pedestalization of sex and amatonormativity make intimacy into a scarce resource that can only be met by one person in the structure of a couple unit. Straightness keeps you in this box, and simultaneously limits possibilities for the rest of us to pursue liberation from these harmful systems.

To be Queer is to be anti-assimilationist, anti-oppression, and pro-liberation. If you choose to call yourself Straight, Queer people are justifiably against you. The label of Straight represents much of what harms us as individuals, in our communities, and on a larger systemic scale. Your personal reasons to call yourself Straight and perceived preferences don’t matter; intentionally claiming and centering an identity label with the meanings described above is oppositional to Queer Liberation. Queer people don’t need Straight sympathy under the guise of Allyship; once the harmful social structures and presuppositions are removed, nobody in favor of our collective (Queer) liberation can be Straight. How to be a “Straight Ally?” Stop being Straight.

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