

## **ASSIGNMENT DESCRIPTION AND RATIONALE**

This assignment gives students the opportunity to participate in a personal Day of Silence (modeled after the national effort sponsored by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network every April) and reflect on their experience in writing. During the Day of Silence, participants willingly refrain from speaking or engaging in meaningful social interaction in order to simulate (a fraction of) the effects of LGBTQ-targeted bullying and harassment and raise public awareness for these issues. Children and teens who identify as LGBTQ are at substantial risk for bullying and interpersonal and sexual violence (CDC, 2018). Additionally, loneliness and social isolation are associated with a host of negative physical and mental health outcomes (Miller, 2011), including an increased risk for early mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). As such this assignment addresses a social issue/public health concern of critical importance and encourages students to engage in acts of everyday advocacy in their daily lives.

Originally developed as one of several short (1-2 double-spaced pages) written reflections for an intensive, month-long introductory psychology class, this exercise was initially assigned in conjunction with the material on motivation, affiliation, and the need to belong. However, this assignment could also be integrated into more specialized courses in social psychology, mental health, health psychology, or the psychology of sex and gender, among others. Likewise, instructors can effectively use this assignment in online, hybrid, or in-person classes of any size. In smaller classes with a face-to-face component, there are also additional opportunities for in-depth discussion and group reflection.

## **ASSIGNMENT OBJECTIVES**

- Improve reflective writing skills
- Consider one's own experiences and privileges
- Gain empathy for marginalized populations through experiential learning

## **WRITING PROMPT**

Aside from basic physiological needs, the need to belong is one of the strongest human motivations. Every April, the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) sponsors a National Day of Silence to raise awareness for children and teens who are bullied, feel little to no sense of belonging, and who may be suffering in silence every day. For this assignment, you will have the opportunity to participate in your own personal Day of Silence and reflect on the experience. (If you choose to complete this assignment, please avoid choosing a day when you know you will face academic or professional consequences for not speaking. I will also have speaking cards available that you can hand out to people who might be confused why you've gone silent.)

Of course, I can't grade you on how seriously you take this assignment because I have no way of knowing how you have gone about your day. However, for the full experience, I recommend going completely silent by forgoing all forms of social media. In addition to remaining silent in the traditional sense, you should also refrain from engaging in any kind of online activity that might serve as a substitute for real-world contact that would cause you to feel any kind of social belonging or approval.

This prompt is intended to be open-ended, so please reflect in any way that is meaningful for you. Here are some ideas to get you thinking: What did you do over the course of the day? How did you feel? How did other people react to you? Did you slip up and speak at some point? (And it's definitely okay if you did.) How did you feel when you finally did speak/meaningfully interact with people again? Are there people in your life who might be experiencing this kind of alienation every day? Did this experience change your perspective? If so, how?

### **SELECT STUDENT REFLECTIONS/FEEDBACK**

- “Because of this experience I hope that I am more aware of those who are feeling isolated and I hope I will be able to be helpful and genuine to those that need a friend. I would like to thank you, Leslie, for introducing me to the Day of Silence. I hope to spread the word and possibly attempt to implement it in my school next year.” (Summer 2015)
- “[At the end of the day], it felt like a basic human right had been taken away from me. I felt blessed... after I realized how privileged I am to have a voice and express my opinion. I only had a glimpse as to what it would be like to suffer in a day of silence, but it breaks my heart to think there are people that suffer every day of their life in silence. I think this should be mandatory to participate in at schools. I want people to know they shouldn't feel alienated because we are here for them. They should have the right to speak up and not be discriminated upon based on their beliefs, looks, etc. I think this is the first step to help take a stand.” (Summer 2016)
- “I realized that for some people [silence] is a [daily] reality... [This activity] changed my perspective because to a certain extent I was left without a voice and I have always taken my speech for granted. We are all human beings and no human being should ever be alienated from another whether it be due to religion, race, sexual orientation, etc. We must speak up for those around us and be more aware of these situations... [This activity] has made me [further realize that] we must take a closer look at how we treat those around us and change [our attitudes and habits] for the better. (Summer 2016)
- “I would not venture to say that this was a fun [exercise]. But what I lost in normal conversations with my friends I gained in perspective... I'm gratified that I was given the opportunity [as a class assignment] and would never hesitate to recommend this exercise to [anyone].” (Summer 2018)

### **REFERENCES**

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2018). LGBT Youth. Retrieved from:

<https://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth.htm>

Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (2018). Day of Silence. Retrieved from:

<https://www.glsen.org/day-silence>

Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., Baker, M., Harris, T., & Stephenson, D. (2015). Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: a meta-analytic review. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 10(2), 227-237.

Miller, G. (2011). Why loneliness is hazardous to your health. *Science*, 331(6014), 138-140.