

## Session 8: INTIMACY & DESIRE

Session Eight was an evening session. The emphasis in this session was on reflecting upon intimate relationships as a way of deepening our collective understanding of how male privilege has shaped our experiences of and approaches to desire, love, sex, power, consent, communication, commitment, family, sexuality and masculinity. Given the range and depth of issues that we wanted to discuss, we identified several key objectives for this session, including:

- Creating a safe supportive space for talking about intimacy, sexuality, masculinity and desire.
- Exploring some of our unhealthy, harmful patterns of expressing desire and building connection and intimacy, and the contexts that have shaped these patterns and how they serve to challenge or reinforce male supremacy
- Developing a liberatory vision of feeling and expressing sexual desire
- Building accountability towards how we feel and express our desire by identifying the skills, practices and support we want to build better relationships and move toward a liberatory vision of desire.
- Practicing a centered response to some of the obstacles and resistances we face in moving towards our commitments

### Preparation

As preparation for this session, we asked participants to reflect on their experiences of intimacy and their own practices of desire and connection. Participants were asked to draw from their lived experiences to answer the following question: “Based on your commitment(s) to challenging male supremacy, what do you want to shift in the way you engage in friendships and romantic relationships?”

To help participants reflect on this, they were asked to approach the question by writing out their values related to connection and relationship with others. Based on this, participants were asked to identify ways in which their practice of making connection and building relationship with others was aligned with their values, and the ways in which it was not.

As a follow-up, participants were asked to write about their responses to this question: “What are you shifting and/or what would you like to shift in your own behavior in order to more deeply align your practice with your values?” Several supporting questions were provided to help participants reflect further on this:

- What forms has desire and connection taken in your intimate and social life?
- What do you see as the greatest challenges for you in achieving loving connection with friends and lovers/partners?
- How does an intersectional understanding of oppression help shed light on some of those challenges?

- Where and how do you see histories of violence and trauma expressed in those connections (or lack of connection)?
- How does your broader collective/political/organizational work support you in making these shifts in the way you express desire and build loving connection with friends and lovers/partners? How could it?

In addition to this writing exercise, we also assigned some readings as preparation for the session, including:

- Chapter 3: “Honesty” from *All About Love* by bell hooks
- Two essays from *Beyond Masculinity: Essays by Queer Men on Gender & Politics*
- Five short 2-3 page selections from the zine *Support* by Philly’s Pissed
- If you can make time, two more chapters from *All About Love* by bell hooks: the Introduction and Chapter 8 “Community: Loving Communion”

### Opening activities

After opening the session with an overview of the session’s objectives and agenda, and a review of the goals, timeline and working agreements for the Study-into-Action process as a whole, we began with a Centering practice. We then led a Mutual Connection practice, focusing on the questions: “How are you doing?” and “What is the relationship between how you connect with other people and how you challenge oppression?”

Participants were then asked to resume moving in the room, taking action from center, select another partner and with their consent enter into another Mutual Connection practice with the following two questions: “What is one thing you are doing to move toward healthier connection?” and “What’s one thing you’re working on/need to work on in terms of moving toward making healthier connection?”

### Reflecting on practices of connection

The main activity of this session was divided into three parts. The first step was a personal writing exercise, in which participants were asked to continue building upon the writing that they had done as prep work for the session. They were given ten minutes each to write about an experience from their lives in which the way they had built connection with another person/other people in ways which were not positive, healthy, or liberatory. Participants were asked to write about this experience specifically in terms of:

- What it expresses about any unhealthy patterns in the ways in which you seek to build intimacy and connection.
- The contexts that shaped these patterns - such contexts include our personal histories, our communities, culture and social networks, as well as systems and institutions that we live within.

The second step of the activity was a pairs exercise, to help synthesize people’s reflections about what they had written. To begin, we asked participants to pair up, and discuss the experiences that they wrote about, the patterns they identified and the

contexts that seemed most significant in shaping these patterns. Taking turns, each person was given ten minutes to discuss their own writing.

For the final ten minutes of the exercise, each pair was given differently colored Post-it notes, a different color for each of the following:

- Aspects of personal history that have shaped our practice of connection
- Aspects of community context that have shaped our practice of connection
- Aspects of institutional context that have shaped our practice of connection
- Practices that we are working on and want to work on in order to build healthier connection

Based on the stories that they had shared and heard, each pair was asked to write on respective Post-it notes the most significant points in relation to each of these four aspects/practices, and to stick up their Post-it notes on butcher paper at the front of the room.

For the third and final part of the activity, we then brought people back together as a large group and debriefed the activity. Participants were given time to look at the notes presented on the butcher papers and then engaged in an open discussion on what could be learned from these notes in terms of unhealthy patterns, common contexts and the practices we need to be in in order to build healthier, and more liberatory connections with others and ourselves.

### **Working on our commitments: getting support and being accountable**

Continuing the work on individual commitments, and relating this to the discussion in this session about building healthier personal connections, we led a somatic Extension practice. We explained and modeled the practice for two rounds before inviting the participants to get into pairs to try the practice. Participants were asked to focus on the following questions during the practice:

- What hinders us in acting on our commitments? Where is the resistance?
- Who are our allies and where can we access support in order to help us act on our commitments?
- How are we accountable around our work on our commitments?

### **Closing activities**

We then closed the session with a reminder on self-care, the preparation assignments for Session Nine and a closing circle, in which everyone was asked to share how they were feeling at the end of the session.