

Different in More Ways Than One.

Providing Guidance for Teenagers on Their Way to Identity, Sexuality and Respect

8 History and Culture

“My friend from the gay/lesbian Jewish group “Sjalhomo” is probably the only person I can talk to about this,” thinks Aaron to himself as he makes his way to the meeting centre. The thoughts in his head are so mixed up that he can’t make sense of them anymore. He likes his teacher, Mr. Lanssen, who teaches History, Philosophy, and Dutch, Aaron’s favourite subjects. He has often wondered whether his teacher being understanding about so many things has anything to do with being in a wheelchair, and therefore constantly having to fight the stereotypes against disabled people. Since Aaron realised he’s gay, he started being more and more interested in finding out which famous figures in history, philosophy and literature were also homosexual. Could it be that Mr. Lanssen was trying to conceal this important information? Maybe he was crazy to give homosexuality such an important place in his life, but... everything had changed since he realised that he was gay. For many questions, gays see the world through different eyes. That’s why he had to know if any of the free thinkers, freedom fighters or great writers had been gay, too. Their lessons in school didn’t say anything about it. Over the last six months, he had distanced himself more and more from his classes and his classmates. When he’s sitting alone in his room, he has no problems learning things, but his participation to the classes is now close to zero. In History and Philosophy, he had always been a very active student.

“Aaron, I don’t appreciate losing my best pupil’s interventions in our discussions. I’ve noticed for some time now that you haven’t been participating in class. Are you having problems at home, or maybe love problems? We’ve always been able to be open with each other. What’s going on?”

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Framework

First of all

Love and sexuality between two men or two women have existed since the beginning of humankind. Only the conditions and forms through which they were experienced were different. On the contrary, lesbian and gay identities are relatively modern. These concepts were only possible after the invention of the term “homosexual”. Today there are multiple identities that exist next to each other and don’t always fit into one special term or expression (e. g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, heterosexual, queer, transgender, etc.)

First of all it has to be said that history as taught in books is a history of men. Therefore we only know of a few examples of women and lesbians in History. The invisibility of lesbians in particular is one of the specific forms of structural discrimination they face. This is the reason why there is a gender imbalance in the examples given in this map.

Because of social prejudice, sexuality between men and between women has for a long time been prosecuted in European history. This prejudice has first been justified with theological arguments, and later pseudo-scientifically.

This is the reason why homosexuality has been declared an illness or mental disorder in the 19th century. Today’s scientific research has proved the opposite: Gays and lesbians are as healthy as heterosexuals (see also chapter “health care”).

Different sources prove that inside European history, there have been women and men who exclusively had sex with persons of the same sex at the latest since the early modern times – although these relationships were characterised as a “sin” and a “crime”, and the death penalty has been used as a punishment for it. Prosecution of homosexual acts has been abolished in all European states – in France in the late 18th century, in other countries during the 20th century. The current term “homosexuality” was created in the 19th century to combat the opinion that homosexuality was a crime. Since the end of the 19th century there have been political and social organisations for homosexual women and men. During the 20th century, women’s liberation as well as the lesbian and gay movement and the general liberalisation concerning sexuality made it possible for more and more homosexual people to develop a positive identity as lesbian or gay.

Basic information

Over time, homosexuality has taken different forms and been expressed in many ways. In some periods of history, and in some current societies, homosexual relationships or homosexual/lesbian contacts have taken the form of same-sex bonding between warriors, mentor relationships, gender mixing and gender swapping, or women assuming the role of men in society. In others, there are ‘gender inscribed systems’ in which one does not talk about ‘homosexuality’ but only makes a distinction between active and passive sex. Usually, in such societies, “passive” sex is less honourable than “active” sex. This prejudice is a carbon copy of the unequal division of gender roles in traditional sexist stereotype. In this construction “passive” men are seen as women and therefore seen as inferior. All these forms differ quite a lot from ‘modern homosexuality’ which means same-sex consenting relationships between adults who identify as gay or lesbian. In such ‘modern’ relationships, the sexual behaviour and the division of tasks is a matter of mutual agreement, not of tradition.

Culturally accepted forms of same-sex relationships

In ancient Greece, same-sex relationships were accepted and encouraged on the condition that they were carried out between older and younger men. Relationships between men were a means of reinforcing the rules and customs of masculine power, of transmitting philosophical knowledge and of reinforcing the bond between warriors. Native Americans had a special respect for the so-called 'two-spirited' people, the 'Berdaches'. These people were neither man nor women. They were often revered experts in the art of medicine. Some Native American cultures consider sexual preferences and gender identity as being non-related. Another conception of same-sex relations may be seen in the original Indian religion where, before the onset of current patriarchal philosophy, aversion against same-sex relations was unknown. There were even homosexual divinities, as can still be seen in temple sculptures and in epic books, poetry and literature.

The influence of the monotheist religions

In countries where the three biggest monotheist religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) are predominant, homosexuality has been strongly stigmatised for millennia. Although same-sex relationships have existed in Europe and the Orient throughout history, Christianity, as well as Islam, deemed such behaviour unlawful, and pushed homosexuality outside the margins of heterosexual norms. Medieval women were sometimes denounced as witches when they were too independent of men, particularly when they lived with other women. In 16th-century Italy, intimate same-sex bonding and sexual relationships among young men were very common, while sex with a woman before marriage was strictly forbidden. In those times, it was quite common for lords, servants and friends to sleep in the same bed. The question of same-sex relationship partly left the realm of theology with the onset of 'sexual science' in the 19th century (Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Sigmund Freud, Magnus Hirschfeld).

Even now, people have very different views on same-sex behaviour. Next to open lesbian and gay lifestyles, one can find a lot of 'unmentioned' same-sex practices, especially in some Mediterranean regions. In some Islamic cultures, same-sex attraction is seen as natural and very seductive, although it is forbidden by the Koran. As long as Muslims do not show such preferences publicly, a lot of same-sex practice is condoned, especially given the strict taboo on heterosexual sex before marriage. Despite the claims of many fundamentalist activists, homosexuality can in no way be thought of as an entirely novel or as a "Western" or "colonialist" phenomenon.

What does this mean for me?

The historical development of sexual lifestyles (including same-sex relationships) is a relevant discussion topic both in schools and in counselling contexts. Understanding how cultural definitions and identities change over time is useful as a general historic and geographic skill. However, this is not just a philosophical exercise. Historical and cultural definitions help to construct reality. Reflecting on the changes in historical and social development can make young people more aware of the origins of current lifestyles. It can provide insight into how definitions have formed over time. This can help break through the rigid perspectives young people may have on sex and sexual lifestyles and help empower them to make up their own minds.

Education

Bear in mind

Dealing with history is not an objective science. It has often been used as a tool in legitimising or opposing change. But by becoming aware of historical developments and influences, people can recognise how their current situation has been shaped by the past and they can change their situation. What is your view on this?

Many scientists believe that morals, ideals and practices of sexual and gender relationships form an important part of social control. These morals, ideals and practices have changed over time. What is your view on this?

How have historical developments influenced your own sexual and relational experience? Which factors have limited or stimulated your self-consciousness about your gender identity and role, your sexual preference and sexual and relational practice? Which of these aspects would you like to share with your pupils?

Sexuality and homosexuality are an interesting and controversial part of social and cultural history. How do you deal with social and sexual history in your lessons? How do the many forms of homosexuality fit in with this?

What are the most important things you want teenagers to take from your lessons about this?

Education

Tools

Storytelling/Oral history

Aim: to make teenagers aware of the way they were raised to perceive sexuality.

Method: All pupils tell something about how they were raised. Question them on how they learned about gender identity, sex roles and about sexuality. Ask them as well what information they missed and how they compensated. An alternative could be to ask the pupils to interview their parents and grand parents (or guardians) about how they learned this. Have them discuss as well what messages they wanted to give to their own children, what they found difficult about that and whether they think they succeeded. As a second stage, the pupils can discuss which differences they see between these stories. Make them discuss conflicts that may have arisen between caretakers and children, or between people in the same generation. How were these resolved?

Another follow-up can be to ask the students how they want to raise their own children. What will they do when their children have opinions that differ from their own? What if their child thinks she/he has lesbian or homosexual feelings?

Please note: Bear in mind that the student may be embarrassed to disclose some elements about her or his private life or sexual orientation. What's more, for the parents and grandparents, being interviewed on subjects such as sexuality may be a bit disturbing and even confrontational. Prepare the pupils for this beforehand and take care they don't transgress the adults' personal boundaries.

Heroines and Heroes

Aim: to explore the importance of role models in history for people with gay and lesbian feelings.

Method: Ask the students to list famous historical figures they consider as role models. Explore why these people are important: as examples of creativity, independence, strength, honesty and so on. Check which role models are chosen by minority students and explore whether this has something to do with their condition. Then tell the students that having role models is especially important for minorities. Ask them why and help them formulate their opinions. (Because minorities are seen as weak or bad, positive role models help correct negative images.) Expand the discussion to homosexuality by asking which role models are important for lesbians, gays and bisexuals.

You may also choose to discuss historical figures that are important to lesbians, gays and bisexuals (see FAQ). Alternatively, you could show a picture of a non-European role model for lesbians, gays and bisexuals, like Oum Khalsoum (Egyptian singer). You could also discuss more recent examples like Virginia Woolf, Oscar Wilde, Freddy Mercury, Dusty Springfield.

Please note: Depending on the intellectual level and interest of your students, you could go into a more personal discussion about current lesbian, gay and bisexual role models like pop stars or into a more academic and historical discussion about why lesbians, gays and bisexuals feel the need to know about gay or lesbian historical figures – for example, why it was so important for many lesbians, gays and bisexuals to say that homosexuality was 'normal' among the ancient Greeks. Another powerful option is to go deeper into images of gays and lesbian in media or film (for example the documentary 'The Celluloid Closet') and discuss it with the students.

Education

F.A.Q.s (Frequently Asked Questions)

Please also refer to the F.A.Q.s for the counselling and health care sector.

Where can I get information about lesbian, gay and bisexual issues in history?

There is a lot of interesting information on the Internet under www.gayhistory.com. The International Gay and Lesbian Archive and Information Service (www.homodok-laa.nl) can refer you to all kinds of specific information.

Which historical figures were homosexual?

Many. To name a few: Sappho, Socrates, Plato, Alexander the Great, Aristotle, King David and Jonathan of Israel, the Roman Emperors Hadrian, Trajan and Heliogabal, Richard I (the Lionheart) of England, Erasmus, Montezuma II of the Aztecs, Edward II of England, Henry III, King of France and Poland, James I of England, Louis XIII of France, Karl XII of Sweden, Christina of Sweden, Peter I of Russia, Frederic II of Prussia, Christian II of Denmark, King (Statholder) of Holland William III (later King of England too), Alexander I of Russia, Ludwig II of Bavaria and the last Chinese emperor Pu Yi.

However, for most of these examples, it is not very 'historically' relevant that they were homosexual, in the sense that their homosexual feelings or relationships did not in themselves make a difference for history as such. But the same goes for famous heterosexuals in history. Still, for many lesbians, gays and bisexuals such historical figures may be important as role models.

How much do I have to know about sexualities in history and culture in order to teach?

You don't need to know great quantities of information. The most important part is to know and to be able to transfer the diversity of emotions, morals, attitudes and practices over times and places. Of course it helps to have some examples of that at hand. However, such examples can be elicited from the students during the lessons as well.

What happened at the Stonewall Inn on Christopher Street?

An important historical turning point in gay rights was the outbreak of riots at the Stonewall Inn a bar for lesbians, gays and transvestites on Christopher Street in New York City. This was the first case of organised resistance by homosexuals against ongoing harassment and raids by the police. The bar was regularly raided and the patrons were insulted and arrested by the police. The police often gave the names of the arrested to family and employers, which often led to social ostracism and to individuals losing their jobs. During a raid in June 1969, the Inn's patrons knocked out a police officer. The next day, the gay movement in New York organised a demonstration which ended in a fight with the police and resulted in full-blown riots going on for several days. This event is celebrated in many countries with an annual gay and lesbian pride demonstration. It is a pity that many people have forgotten that the original resistance was started by transvestites, some of whom were black.

“Will my grades stay the same even if you’re not satisfied with my class participation?” Aaron stares at his shoes, embarrassed.

“Of course not. Since I know that something’s troubling you and that that’s why you’ve become so silent, I’d like to make you an offer. Write something on a theme related to Philosophy and History. If you can make a great presentation, you’ll be back on track, OK?”

“Thanks, Mr. Lanssen.”

To go to the university, you have to have good marks on your final exams. But could he risk working his question about possible famous homosexual personalities in History, Philosophy and Literature into his oral presentation? Wouldn’t Mr. Lanssen flunk him immediately?

Aaron is certain that there have always been gays and lesbians throughout history, but that these cases have been hushed up. He just had to find them.

“Shalom, Aaron, you seem to be lost in thought.” Josef takes him in his arms with a big smile. “Is there anything wrong, my love?”

“Oh, Josef, I have to do an oral presentation in front of my class.” And then Aaron tells him the whole story.

The others from “Sjalhomo” come closer, one by one, to listen to him.

“I’ve been wondering which famous women in history were lesbians. It’s important to know, and besides, it’s exciting,” commented Yael.

“Have you already tried the Internet?” asks Dani, who always looks up everything on the Web.

“That’s a good idea,” reflected Aaron. “Can you help me?”

“I’ve already researched your question, Aaron. After all, I’m a student of Philosophy.”

Aaron turns to stare at Josef.

“But you never even told me” exclaims Aaron, surprised.

“Better late than never,” joked Josef. “Now, Aaron, if you want to save your grade in History and Philosophy, I you should choose to study Erasmus of Rotterdam. He was born in 1469 and lived until 1536. He was revolutionary for his time; he was a theologian but also a pedagogue. In reality, he was much more of a humanist than a theologian and he was famous in his own lifetime. He even campaigned for the equality of women. He lead the emancipation movement on various levels. And the best part is that he was gay. Choose him as your essay topic, Aaron. It will be great, you’ll see. I’ll help you.”

“All right,” said Aaron with a smile.

“Mr. Lanssen, I’m preparing my presentation and I wanted to discuss the theme with you. Only if you have time, of course.”

“I’m glad you took up my offer so quickly. What’s the essay about?”

“It’s essentially about Erasmus of Rotterdam. That name must mean something to you.”

“As indeed it should. Erasmus of Rotterdam is still considered to be the founding father of enlightened thought.”

“Did you ever stop to think that maybe Erasmus had a very personal motive for representing the humanistic school of thought?”

“To be honest, no. But you’ve thought about it?”

“Yes, that’s why I selected him. Did you know that he was gay?”

“Oh...! No, I didn’t know that. And you think that his homosexuality gave him the impetus for enlightened thought?”

“Unfortunately, it’s too late for me to ask him – it’s just a theory. But that’s the basis of my essay.”

“It’s unusual and it will perhaps make you interested in my lessons again. That’s true, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I didn’t want to keep my homosexuality a secret from the others any more.”

“A very personal motive, then” says Mr. Lanssen with a smile. Even if I agree with your choice of topic, Aaron, I would like you to keep in mind that in Erasmus’ time, homosexuality was not as accepted and talked about as it is today, and it definitely wasn’t called that way. It’s always very tricky to force a definition on someone who can’t say anything about it any more. I’ll accept your topic with this one limitation, is that okay?”

“I’ll have to think about it a little longer, then” answers Aaron.

“May I take a look at what you’ve already written?”

“The introduction is already finished. The part about Erasmus of Rotterdam still needs to be formulated. And the last part will deal with the link to our modern times. I’ll need another week for that.”

“That’s fine,” said Mr. Lanssen, as he began to read.

History is like a field of flowers in the spring, filled with souvenirs of past journeys and biographies telling stories. One can always find what he looks for. The millennia of human history has produced millions of personal stories and in many of them people have asked themselves the same questions about being in love or being proud, being accepted or being persecuted. Such situations have already occurred many times, sometime, somewhere...

For a long time, ancient Greece – the country of Sappho - has been seen by lesbians, gays and bisexuals as a kind of paradise. But even at that time in history, Athens’ laws restricted homosexuality. It was felt that men should have a wife and children. In a limited sense, a relationship between a man and a boy was accepted as a part of the boy’s education. Sometime this relationship was one of passion, sometimes it was more for educational purposes. But for the lovers, growing up was hard.

The first persecutions of homosexuals began in the time of the early Christians. In ancient Rome, Emperor Augustine (313) subjected gay men to castration; by the end of the century, they were even being burned. Some examples of homosexuality reappear in the 12th century with “amour courtois” (chivalrous love), which was not limited to heterosexual affections. Although we don’t know much about the homosexual aspects of amour courtois, the pope declared that such love affairs should not involve homosexual dimensions. This implies that there were indeed chivalrous homosexual affairs before he made his statement.

During the Renaissance, some artists expressed themselves more visibly in a homo-erotic way. The writings of Plato were translated. Although homosexuality was still officially forbidden at this time, some men were gay including Leonardo da Vinci. At 24 years of age, he was persecuted because he had a relation with a boy of 17. Later, he had a relationship with young Caprotti which lasted for 25 years. Michelangelo was proud of his identity and his work was an ode to loving men.

“I just can’t wait to see how it continues,” said Mr. Lanssen. “I’ll finish reading next Friday.”

the end

Counselling and Health Care

Bear in mind

We all live in a cultural and historical context which determines, at least partly, our thoughts and feelings. The influences of history and culture should be a matter of reflection, above all for those who interact with women and men in the course of their work, such as doctors, psychologists, social workers, etc. Your own personal history has an influence on the way you deal with clients. Many of us are not aware of this and it is often not taught in professional education. Which particular culture do you belong to? Does it have an influence on your professional behaviour?

Even scientific theories are subject to historical and cultural changes: for example, until a few decades ago, psychiatry, psychology and psychoanalysis considered homosexuality an illness. This view is no longer considered correct because of new scientific findings and, above all, a new cultural sensibility. What is your opinion on this?

It is not always easy to talk about sexuality in counselling, but it is very important. What were you taught about sexuality when you were growing up? What effects has the history of homosexuality had on your culture? In what ways has it existed in the history of your culture? How has it changed over the years?

In sessions with clients, you might encounter open or internalised homophobia. However, to oppose a culture's homophobia does not mean you should impose the current lesbian and gay culture upon it. Respecting cultural differences should not be confused with non-critical acceptance of the many cultural variations of right and wrong.

Counselling and Health Care Tools

Individual Counselling

Identifying Historical and Cultural Messages about Homosexuality

Aim: to explore historical and cultural messages about homosexuality which are relevant to the client's personal situation.

Method: Give the client something to read about views on homosexuality in history and culture. Ask your client what messages about sexuality and homosexuality he/she has learned when growing up. Explain how their own history or culture influences the way they perceive themselves as being gay or lesbian. Compare this with another story that shows a different view on homosexuality (it is particularly useful if you can find a story from the client's own culture).

Please note: Whichever readings you choose, they should somehow be linked to the client's current situation. It could give examples of role models, it could help to soften rigid opinions or it could give a concrete context to heterosexual norms that limit the client's frame of thinking or behaviour.

An Extended Family Tree

Aim: to explore historical and cultural messages about homosexuality that are relevant to the client's situation.

Method: Let your client draw an 'extended family' tree (with all people who are socially relevant for the client) with these questions:

1. Where does everybody fit in?
2. Where do they come from, where were they born?
3. Which of these people had an important role in teaching you about your history and sexuality?
4. Which of these people gave you messages about homosexuality? What kind of messages?
5. Which members are important to keep in the extended family tree – which of them will support you and your feelings?
6. How can you deal with the people who might not be very supportive or who might be negative?
7. How can you add more people who will support you to your extended family tree?

Please note: This exercise may take several sessions or may be an aspect that returns to sessions several times. Don't push clients to answer the last questions when they are not psychologically ready for it. Some clients with homosexual feelings will feel such a loyalty to their current social network, that it may be difficult for them to imagine alternative choices. Furthermore, in some extreme situations, giving homosexual feelings a place in their life may create a rift with the traditional family.

Advice for intercultural communication

- You can win your client's trust by asking questions about their family. Many non-Western cultures are less Me-oriented.
- Be honest to your client concerning your lack of knowledge about cultural customs.
- Be aware that in some hierarchical cultures counsellors have much more prestige and are seen as more of an authority.

Counselling and Health Care

F.A.Q.s (Frequently Asked Questions)

Please also refer to the F.A.Q.s for the education sector.

How do I deal with cultural differences when communicating with my client?

It is more important to have an open attitude than to have a lot of knowledge. A bit of background information and factual knowledge (for example certain words) can break the ice. Don't be afraid to be honest to your client about the differences and about your knowledge.

Is effective counselling possible when counsellor and client are from different cultures?

Yes, It is. In any case, the counsellor should know the client's culture or have experience with people from different cultural backgrounds. Obviously, understanding is easier when counsellor and client share the same cultural patterns: in this situation the client can feel more comfortable because he/she can leave out obvious and culturally rooted meanings. Sometimes, however, it may be preferable to refer the client to a colleague from the same culture that you know is gay and lesbian friendly.

What can I do in cases of multiple discrimination / double minority (for example being gay and Muslim)?

A case of double minority is particularly difficult when the client's identification as homosexual is in conflict with his/her cultural or religious identification. In such cases, the aim should be to help the client integrate the parts of the two cultures that are in conflict. This then creates a sort of biculturalism, a new personal synthesis of the two cultures, which allows the client to move between the two cultures with the highest degree of adaptation. This flexibility and ability to use a double cultural code permits the client to use the resources of each culture in accordance with different needs and situations. Culture is not something which cannot be changed.

How do I deal with the issue of sexuality with clients who have strong feelings of shame?

Remember that sexuality and shame are always intertwined, in all cultures. Sexuality in general is a difficult but important issue to talk about in counselling gay and lesbian clients. Non-directive questions can be asked or you can ask your client to write down sexuality issues instead of openly speaking about them.

“In school and elsewhere, nobody talks about the fact that same-sex relationships existed in the past, and that they are common in many cultures nowadays. Yet I find it so important to know that there actually were people who used to feel very much the same as I do. I, too, want to know where I come from and where I belong.”

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