

Let's talk about sex!

"Have you heard that Peter is gay?"

- Themes** Health, Discrimination and Xenophobia, Gender equality
- Complexity** Level 4
- Group size:** 10+
- Time:** 60
- Overview** This activity uses the "fish-bowl" technique to explore attitudes to sexuality including homophobia.
- Related rights**
- The right to marry and found a family
 - The right to freedom and discrimination and equality of treatment
 - The rights of expression and association.
- Objectives**
- To address issues and rights related to sexuality, including homosexuality
 - To develop self-confidence to express one's own opinion on these issues
 - To promote tolerance and empathy
- Materials**
- 3 chairs
 - 2 facilitators
 - Space for participants to move about
 - Board or flipchart and markers
 - Small slips of paper and pens
 - A hat
- Preparation**
- Be aware that in many communities sexuality is a sensitive issue and be prepared to adapt either the methodology or the topic – or both!
 - Identify a few people who have been out-spoken about their sexuality including heterosexual and homosexual, bisexual and transsexual men and women.

Instructions

1. Set the scene. Explain that, although most people view sexuality as a private matter, the right not to be discriminated against because of sexual orientation is a fundamental human right and protected by legislation in most European countries. This activity is an opportunity to explore attitudes to sexuality and in particular to homosexuality. Then warm up with a brainstorm of famous people who have been out-spoken about their sexuality.
2. Hand out the slips of paper and pens and ask people to write down any questions they have about homosexuality or sexuality in general, and to put their papers in the hat. The questions should be anonymous.
3. Explain that this activity is about exploring attitudes to sexuality and in particular to homosexuality. Everyone is free to express opinions that may be conventional or unconventional, controversial or which challenge the norms of their society. People

THEMES



HEALTH



DISCRIMINATION



GENDER EQUALITY

COMPLEXITY



LEVEL 4

GROUP SIZE



10 OR MORE

TIME



60 MINUTES

may present points of view with which they agree, or with which they disagree with without fear of ridicule or contempt.

4. Place the three chairs in a half-circle in front of the group. These are for the three conversationalists who are in the “fish-bowl”. The rest of the group are observers.
5. Explain that you will begin by inviting two volunteers to join you in a conversation in the “fish bowl”. If at any point someone else would like to join you then they may do so, but as there is only room for three fish in the bowl at any one time, someone will have to swap out. Someone who wishes to join the conversation should come forward and gently tap one of the “conversationalists” on the shoulder. These two people exchange seats and the original “conversationalist becomes an observer.
6. Encourage people to come forward to express their own opinions, but also to express other opinions, which are not necessarily their own. In this way points of view that are controversial, “politically incorrect”, or unthinkable can be aired and the topic thoroughly discussed from many different perspectives.
7. Offensive or hurtful comments, which are directed at individuals in the group, are not allowed.
8. Ask a volunteer to pick up a question from the hat and start discussing it. Let the discussion run until people have exhausted the topic and points are being repeated.
9. Then ask for three volunteers to discuss another question and start another round of conversations under the same rules as before.
10. Discuss as many questions as adequate in function of the time you have and the interest of the group. Before you finally go on to the debriefing and evaluation, take a short break to allow time for people to come out of the “fish-bowl”. This is especially important if the discussion has been heated and controversial.

Debriefing and evaluation

Start with a brief review of how people felt being both inside and outside the “fish-bowl”. Then go on to talk about the different views that were expressed, and finally discuss what people learnt from the activity:

- Was anyone shocked or surprised by some points of view expressed? Which ones? Why?
- In your community, how open-minded are people generally about sexuality?
- Are some groups more open than others? Why?
- What forces mould how our sexuality develops?
- Where do people get their values about sexuality from?
- Do participants’ attitudes about sexuality differ from those of their parents and grandparents? If so, in what ways do they differ? Why?
- In some countries, laws and social pressure appear to conflict with the human rights of the individual to respect and dignity, to fall in love with the person of his/her own choice, to marry freely etc. How can such conflicts be resolved?

Tips for facilitators

Be aware of the social context in which you are working and adapt the activity accordingly. The aim of this activity is to allow participants to reflect on their own sexuality and the norms of their society and to encourage them to have the self-confidence to express their own point of

view while being tolerant of people who hold different views. The aim is *not* to convince people of one point of view or another, nor to come to a consensus decision.

Before running the activity it is recommended that you prepare yourselves by reading the background information on gender and on discrimination and xenophobia. Think over what topics may come up. Some frequently asked questions and issues include:

- What is homosexuality?
- What are the differences between heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual people?
- Is homosexuality an illness?
- How do people become gay or lesbian?
- What about the risk of AIDS?
- In some countries homosexuality is accepted and gay people can get married in others it is punishable by death.
- How do homosexuals make love?

It is also important for you as facilitators to reflect on your own values and beliefs about what is right for yourselves, your families and for others and to remember that these values will be reflected in everything you do and say, and what you don't do or say. It is crucial that you acknowledge your own values and prejudice and understand the origins of those values in order that the participants may also develop insights into the origins of their own values.

The aim of the brainstorm of famous people who have been outspoken about their sexuality is to encourage the participants themselves to be open about discussing sexuality. It is also an opportunity to clarify terms such as gay and lesbian, homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual and transsexual. (See the background information on page 339).

Your role in the activity is crucial in setting the general tone. It is a good idea to start off with two facilitators as conversationalists. For example, one of you may start by saying, "Have you heard, Peter has announced that he is gay?" The other might reply, "No, I would never have thought it, I mean he doesn't *look* gay". In this way you imply that the conversation is about a mutual friend and therefore at a "local" level and not a theoretical debate. It also helps open up a discussion about what people know about homosexuality and their attitudes to it.

Hopefully one of the observers will quickly replace you, thus enabling you to leave the discussion to the participants. However, you should continue to participate as an observer so that you maintain the possibility of taking another turn as a conversationalist. This leaves open the possibility for you to discretely manipulate the discussion either to open up different avenues of debate or to tactfully remove a participant who is not keeping to the rules.

If you wish to, you can introduce a rule that any particular point of view can only be raised once. This prevents the discussion focusing on only a few aspects of the topic and helps to discourage repetition of popular prejudices.

Variations

Other topics that could be used include:

- The age of consent (to marriage or to having sex): should it be different for homosexuals?
- Adoption and marriage: should gay and lesbian couples be allowed to marry? And to adopt children? Why / Why not?
- Aids: is it true that homosexuals are more exposed?

Suggestions for follow-up

If people are interested in exploring other aspects of discrimination including those of the rights of transsexuals to compete in sports, then they may like to do the activity “Just a minute”, on page 150.

Taking action

Contact gay or lesbian organisations in your country; finding about them is one way to take action! Invite one of their representatives to address your group and find out which issues of equality and rights are the most pressing in your own country.

Further information

"Human sexuality is an integral part of life. Our sexuality influences our personality and behavioural characteristics - social, personal, emotional, psychological - that are apparent in our relationships with others. Our sexuality is shaped by our sex and our gender characteristics and by a host of other complex influences, and is subject to life long dynamic change".

ASPA information technology project, www.aspa.asn.au

Sexual diversity and human rights

At a common sense level, these two issues appear not to be related. It might be argued that the one is related to private and individual choice, the other to the public domain of legal and political structures, which operate in relation to citizenship. Yet, recent historical, anthropological and sociological studies show how sexual identity and modes of expression of sexual desire are seen, both over time and across cultures, to be potentially disruptive to the maintenance of social order. In some contexts, same or ambiguous sex desire challenges or ruptures traditional or religious beliefs, in others it may be regarded as a psychological illness.

There is a hegemonic force which lies at the centre of the connection between sexual diversity and human rights, and which arguably operates to consistently marginalize equal access to human rights. That force is the institutionalised assumption that heterosexuality as 'naturally ordained' and therefore the 'normal' mode of expression of sexual desire. A constant theme in this process marginalisation is the assumption that heterosexuality is “natural” and therefore morally acceptable while other forms of sexual expression are “unnatural” and therefore morally unacceptable.

Adapted from the Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, www.iglhrc.org

Key date:

29 December
International Day for
Biological Diversity