

Overview

This activity uses the "fish-bowl" technique to explore attitudes to sexuality, including homophobia.

Related rights

- The right to equality
- Freedom from discrimination
- Freedoms of expression and association

Objectives

- To expand understanding about issues and rights related to sexuality and sexual identity
- To develop self-confidence to express one's own opinion about diversity in sexual preferences
- To promote tolerance and empathy towards others who are different

Materials

- 3 chairs
- 2 facilitators (preferable)
- Space for participants to move about
- Board or flipchart and markers
- Small slips of paper and pens
- A hat

Preparation

- Be aware that for many people – especially young people! – sexuality is a very personal and sensitive issue. Be prepared to adapt either the methodology or the topic – or both!
- Identify a few well known 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 and heterosexism. 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 may present points of view with which they agree, or with which they disagree 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. Everyone is welcome to come forward to express their opinions, but they may also express 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. Emphasise that offensive or hurtful comments, which are directed at individuals in the group, are not allowed.

7. 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.

8. Then ask for another three volunteers to start a discussion about another question under the same rules as before.

9. Discuss as many questions as you have time for. 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 & 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 young men and young women expected to conform to specific sexual orientations and roles? Which?
- How are (young) people who do not fall within these expectations perceived and treated?
- Are some groups more open than others? Why?
- What forces shape 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?
- Are there any laws in your country that prohibit sexual relations between consenting adults? If so, what do the laws prohibit? Why do they exist? Do you think that they are reasonable?
- Article 16 of the UDHR states: "Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family." Why is "sexual orientation" not included in the list together with "race, nationality or religion"? Should it be?
- 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

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](#). 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.

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 in [Chapter 5](#).

Your role in the activity is crucial in setting the general tone. One way to start off could be by using two facilitators as conversationalists. One of you could start by saying, "Have you heard, Peter has come out about being 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.

If you need to give the group some ideas for questions to discuss you could suggest the following:

- Should the age of consent (to marriage or to having sex) be different for homosexuals?
- Should gay and lesbian couples be allowed to marry and to adopt children? Why / Why not?
- Is it true that men who have sex with men are more likely to get AIDS than women who have sex with men?

If the group is large there will not be time to discuss all the questions. Be aware that some people may feel disappointed or frustrated because their question was not raised. To attempt to overcome this you can, at the end of the session, tape all the questions on the wall. This will motivate participants to continue the discussion in their own time.

Sexual diversity and human rights

At first sight these two issues may 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 arguably a social and religious hegemony that consistently operates to marginalize equal access to human rights. The institutionalised assumption is that heterosexuality is "natural" and therefore the "normal" mode of expression of sexual desire and therefore also morally acceptable while other forms of sexual expression are "unnatural" and morally unacceptable.