

Identities

Activity

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This is a seminar plan for an activity- and discussion-based session lasting 50 minutes. The session is aimed at second- or third-year undergraduate history students with some understanding of the history of gender and sexuality.

Context and aim

This seminar activity explores the concept of the historical contingency of gender, sex and sexuality. It challenges students to reflect on why it matters if people in the past understood their bodies, relationships and identities differently from us. The activity makes use of recent popular visual representations, in particular the 'GenderBread Person', as well as an academic article that uses a micro-history to historicize the concept of 'gender'. Students engage with these representations of gender, sex and sexuality and think about how they have changed over time. The seminar ends with an activity that is also deliberately playful. By inviting students to draw visual representations of past 'gender logics', they have the opportunity to analyse and to express themselves in a different mode from traditional verbal or written arguments. This portion of the seminar also has the potential to link to other sources, if this activity is part of a module on the wider history of gender and/or sexuality, and can be tailored to address different historical and geographical contexts.

Preparation

Students should prepare for the seminar by reading the following article:

Mo Moulton, “Both Your Sexes”: A Non-Binary Approach to Gender History, Trans Studies and the Making of the Self in Modern Britain’, *History Workshop Journal*, 95 (Spring 2023).

They should also explore some contemporary representations of gender:

- GenderBread Person at <https://www.itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2018/10/the-genderbread-person-v4/>
- Gender Unicorn at <https://transstudent.org/gender/>
- Gender Galaxy at <https://safelinkalberta.ca/gender-a-galaxy-of-possibilities/>

The seminar leader may want to prepare to project the representations on a screen or distribute handouts. They should also bring drawing materials for the students to use.

Description of activity

Part 1: Representations discussion [15 minutes]

The seminar leader should introduce the contemporary representations (GenderBread Person, Gender Unicorn and Gender Galaxy), followed by a brief large-group discussion sharing initial impressions of these representations. Ask the students which they like best and why. [5 minutes]

Then, divide the seminar into three groups and assign one representation to each group. Ask them to discuss:

- When was the representation made and by whom? Is there any evidence of it being changed over time? Why? (This is especially important for the GenderBread Person.)
- What is the point of this representation? What is it trying to convey?
- What do you think are this representation’s strengths and weaknesses? What’s missing? What might you want to change? [5 minutes]

Returning to the full group, invite each group to share some of their reflections. [5 minutes]

Part 2: Article discussion [15 minutes]

Now, the students should turn to the article and discuss it. The key points here are, first, the idea that ‘gender’ as a category is fairly recent, and second, that historians have to decide whether and how to use contemporary categories when analysing the past.

Possible discussion questions include:

- What is the history of the concept of ‘gender’? Try drawing a timeline together.
- What did you learn about Muriel St Clare Byrne? Look at the photographs together: what do they reveal or conceal about Byrne’s sense of self?
- Why does Moulton use the pronoun ‘she’ for Muriel St Clare Byrne? Should he have used a different pronoun? Why or why not? How would it change the article?
- Moulton suggests that historians should ‘hold our own categories more lightly’. What do you think this means?

Part 3: Drawing [10 minutes]

Working in pairs or groups of three, students should draw a visual representation of ‘gender/sex/sexuality’ rooted in a specific historical perspective. Emphasize to students that they do not need good drawing skills – the point is to think about what a visual representation *might* look like and to try to convey that as best they can.

The most straightforward approach here is to ask students to imagine that they are Muriel St Clare Byrne in, say, the 1930s. How would Byrne – living prior to our modern concept of gender – draw a representation of the relationship between embodiment, self-expression, self-understanding, and attraction or romance?

If this activity is part of a larger module on gender and/or sexuality, you might also invite the students to choose other specific historical perspectives rooted in other texts you’ve read together. Good candidates from modern British history would include the second chapter of Edward Carpenter’s *The Intermediate Sex* (1908) or the judgment in *Corbett v Corbett* (1971).

Part 4: Conclusion [10 minutes]

Ask each group to share their drawings. End with a discussion on why it matters that ‘gender’, as well as ‘sex’ and ‘sexuality’, are historically contingent. Share, on the board or a projected slide, this quotation from the 1999 preface to Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*:

One might wonder what use ‘opening up possibilities’ finally is, but no one who has understood what it is to live in the social world as what is ‘impossible’, illegible, unrealizable, unreal, and illegitimate is likely to pose that question.

Discuss what relevance it has for history, and whether history, too, can open up possibilities.