




Research article

'Shameful histories' – shame and sex perceived by secondary school students in history education

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Abstract

A challenge for history education in Sweden involves integrating questions regarding relationships and sex education. The purpose of this article is to explore how students and teachers relate historical narratives about women's sexuality between the past and present, with a particular focus on students' discussion of shame. To analyse shame as something beyond the individual, we focus on the interrelationship of gender, sexuality and shame. The study builds on a poststructural understanding of gender, norms, sexuality and subjectification. The data comprise video-recorded classroom observations, focus group interviews with 16–19-year-old students, and interviews with their teachers. The findings are structured into two themes: shame as regulating women's sexuality, and sexualised shame as a historical continuity. We conclude that it is highly challenging for a history teacher to construe a classroom environment that breaks with traditional

historiography without resorting to a fragmentation of history into isolated case studies of the spectacular.

Keywords history education; relationship and sex education; gender; sexuality; shame

Introduction

Relationship and sex education (RSE) is a complex field, with possible tensions between scientific facts, norms, values, history, society, culture and philosophy (Planting-Bergloo, 2023). Integrating RSE into history education could provide a basis for important conversations displaying the contexts and historicity of norms, gender and expectations regarding sexuality in both the past and the present (for example, Fisher et al., 2017).

Sex education in Sweden has been part of the public school system since 1942, and mandatory since 1955 (Lindgren et al., 2023). In the 1994 curriculum for compulsory school, it was stated that sex education should be treated as an interdisciplinary field of knowledge, integrated into various school subjects. This is also emphasised in the new curriculum and discussions surrounding education after the MeToo movement (Government Offices of Sweden, 2022; Knoxborn, 2020; Skolinspektionen, 2024; Skolverket, 2022b). We suggest that including RSE in history education can be emotionally challenging for both teachers and students, drawing on previous research in both gender studies and history education concerning emotional labour (Ahmed, 2014; Mocnik, 2021; Retz, 2018; Richardson, 2021; Wilschut and Schiphorst, 2019).

One challenge for history education in Sweden is integrating questions regarding sexuality and relationships. Until 2020, there were no national guidelines for including RSE in Swedish teacher education (Knoxborn, 2020), which may explain why teachers might hesitate to include RSE in their subjects. The change implemented in 2020 made education about RSE mandatory for all teacher students, regardless of their educational subject. Statistics on how many teachers actually include RSE are not available. However, some teachers do incorporate RSE into their subjects. This article will explore a few history education classrooms where RSE is a part of the content. The Swedish National Agency for Education (SNAE) has published support resources for teachers on how to include RSE in different subjects (for example, Skolverket, 2022a), but since it is not mandatory in subjects other than biology, history teachers, for example, decide whether to include it or not. The support material describes which parts of history education intersect with RSE according to SNAE (Skolverket, 2022a), which emphasises that history teachers could, for example, discuss sexuality in relation to living conditions, religion and legislation in different historical periods. This article investigates what happens in a history education classroom when history teachers and their students incorporate RSE questions into the subject of history. As yet, there are no studies conducted on how Swedish teachers incorporate RSE into history education. When students in upper secondary school study history and engage with questions regarding RSE, they come across different views of norms, sexuality and relationships in various historical settings, from which they create different meanings (Fisher et al., 2017).

During the observation period for this study, it became apparent that the students discussed women's sexuality more than men's sexuality in lessons and interviews. Moreover, during the analytical stage, it was evident that shame was a recurring topic initiated by teachers during lessons, which the students continued to discuss in interviews. The purpose of this article is to explore how students and teachers relate historical narratives about women's sexuality between the past and present, with a special focus on how connections and disconnections between past, present and subject positions are enacted by students and teachers.

Situating the study

RSE can be viewed as a field where natural science, history, politics, culture and market-oriented concerns converge. This creates a complex web for teachers and students to navigate (Planting-Bergloo et al., 2021). It is also part of a larger discourse connecting sexuality to patriarchal norms for masculinity and femininity (for example, Sultana, 2012). The concept of patriarchy is grounded in a male-dominated system that favours men's opinions and experiences over women's (Sultana, 2012). A patriarchal norm

is one that highlights men as strong, active subjects in control, and women as weak, passive and under male control (Lerner, 1986; Sultana, 2012). A recurring theme in the construction of women's sexuality, and a focus of the present study, is the Madonna-whore dichotomy (Bareket et al., 2018; Conrad, 2006; Cruz, 2021; Kahalon et al., 2019). This dichotomy has its roots in Christian stories about the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene; moreover, it has become a discourse about female sexuality, portraying women as either Madonna or whore (Conrad, 2006; Kahalon et al., 2019). We argue that the dichotomy is not solely connected to Christianity, but also to societal norms for women, with similar rules found within other religions (Kretschmer et al., 2024; Saharso et al., 2023), suggesting its somewhat universal nature. Another aspect highlighted in previous research is that norms are different for men and women; men are often seen as autonomous whereas women are understood in relation to men and family, without the same agency as men (Bareket et al., 2018; Christianson et al., 2021; Conrad, 2006; Cruz, 2021; Kahalon et al., 2019; Sultana, 2012). Previous research within the field of history education concerning gender and sexuality suggests that similar constructions of patriarchy and views of roles for men and women are present (Axelsson, 2012; Boyd, 2019; Chiponda and Wassermann, 2011; Daybell et al., 2020; Fine-Meyer and Llewellyn, 2018; Frederickson, 2004; Levstik, 2015; Smith Crocco, 2018).

Based on this framework, how teenagers discuss sexuality in relation to gender becomes an example of how norms are produced and reproduced in relation to the history education studied. A study by Planting-Bergloo et al. (2023), for example, illustrates how it is deemed important to safeguard virginity, especially for teenage girls. Planting-Bergloo et al. (2023) suggest that there is a need for further discussion about sex and virginity in more subjects than natural sciences in school, in order to nuance and problematise gendered norms. Previous research in history education has also shown how gendered norms are prevalent in history textbooks: women and men are often represented in binary terms, and the textbooks typically do not problematise questions regarding gender, norms and sexuality (Alayan and Al-Khalidi, 2010; Ammert, 2016; Boyd, 2019; Brugar et al., 2014; Frederickson, 2004; Levstik and Groth, 2002; Strasser and Tinsman, 2005). Heterosexuality is often viewed by students as timeless and static in history education (Gerhard, 2010), despite its connection and interaction with time, power, culture and nature (Karmakar and Sarkar, 2021; Mocnik, 2021). Similar connections regarding race are made in King and Simmons's (2018) work, which illuminates common issues.

Previous research on RSE shows that although scientific facts about human reproduction are important for students' ability to navigate the advantages and disadvantages of contraception, for example (Planting-Bergloo et al., 2021), there is more to RSE than just biology and natural sciences (Hobaica et al., 2019; Planting-Bergloo et al., 2023). Norms and values are intertwined with scientific facts about reproduction, and this is one of the challenges for RSE, according to Planting-Bergloo et al. (2023). In line with Junkala et al. (2021), there are other challenges for RSE, such as stereotypical gender binaries and heteronormative traditions in biology textbooks, which can limit perceptions of bodies and sexualities (for example, Abbott et al., 2015; Hobaica et al., 2019; Mocnik, 2021). From this perspective, LGBTQ+ students risk being excluded in RSE if heteronormative language is used (Hobaica et al., 2019), and Harris et al.'s (2022) study shows that positioning LGBTQ+ issues in RSE risks making these issues marginal and controversial. However, gender-neutral language risks making the education gender-blind instead (Planting-Bergloo, 2023).

Discussing sex and sexuality in history education could potentially disconnect the subject matter from students' own lives, thereby making it easier for them to participate in discussions, according to Fisher et al. (2017), as students can choose how much of their own lives they want to bring into the discussion. Therefore, this disconnection makes another form of empathic connection possible (Fisher et al., 2017; Retz, 2018).

Analytical framework

The study builds on a poststructural understanding of gender, norms, sexuality and subjectification (Butler, 1990). Norms include which sexuality is presumed to be the standard; it is only in relation to homosexuality that heterosexuality becomes visible: the non-standard makes the standard visible (Butler, 1990). The productions and reproductions of gender occur in relation to discourses. The starting point is an understanding of discourses as practices, wherein individuals construct their reality through the use of words, contexts and bodily expressions, in relation to previous expressions made by themselves and others, as well as in relation to other discourses (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 2002). The focus in the

analysis is not on discourses per se, but on the subjectification, positioning and negotiation made by the students within the discursive practices. In the interviews, the students discuss history and history education while, at the same time, positioning themselves in relation to others in the present, as well as to individuals from the past (presented to them in the form of lesson materials provided by the teacher), and to overall societal norms.

In order to theorise and understand students' discursive practices regarding shame as a theme in relation to sexuality, the analysis includes an understanding of shame based on the works of [Ahmed \(2014\)](#), [Bartky \(1990\)](#) and [Munt \(2008\)](#). Shame can be understood as a regulating emotion that exerts control over a person both internally and externally, where internal or concealed shame is often acknowledged as guilt ([Zembylas, 2008](#)). Breaking norms can evoke feelings of shame or guilt ([Ahmed, 2014](#)). However, breaking norms can also elicit a sense of pride in going against the norms. According to [Fischer \(2018\)](#), shame is closely connected to power and gender(ing). Shame is described by [Fischer \(2018: 371\)](#) as a slippery embodied feeling that is difficult to identify, define and analyse. Shame can either be felt by the person or imposed upon them by others, but it always implies an assumed audience that judges the Othered ([Ahmed, 2004, 2014; Bartky, 1990; Munt, 2008](#)). To analyse shame as something beyond the individual, we focus on the interrelationship between gender, sexuality and shame as articulated by teachers and students. In this article, the term sexuality is used as an umbrella term for both sexual orientation and sexual relationships, that is, as something performed, since [Butler \(1993\)](#) views sexuality and gender as closely connected through the heterosexual matrix.

Gender can be seen as a normative institution that regulates and controls sexuality on different terms for different genders ([Butler, 1997](#)). According to [Butler \(1990\)](#), gender and subjectification are constantly being negotiated and renegotiated, produced and reproduced, without a pre-existing original. The production and reproduction of gender still have some stability, as people cite previous (re)productions, and these (re)productions correlate with societal norms for different genders. The perceptions of what is considered male or female have changed throughout history. They are performed, negotiated and understood through their relation to power and mediated through language and bodily expressions ([Butler, 1990; Connell, 2003; Davies, 2006](#)). Different norms apply to men and women regarding sexuality, relationships and accountability. Both power and subjectification are unstable, multiple and contextually specific, which suggests that they are constantly changing and being renegotiated through discursive practices ([Butler, 1997; Youdell, 2004](#)). In this article, the focus is on sexuality, but by understanding sexuality as something that can also be gendered in accordance with [Butler \(1997\)](#), it is related to gender and gender identity.

Data generation and analysis

The article draws on data generated through video-recorded classroom observations and focus group interviews conducted with students in Swedish upper secondary school (aged 16–19), as well as interviews with their teachers. The data were collected in the second semester of the academic year 2020/1 and the first semester of the academic year 2021/2. Observations and interviews were conducted in three different schools in Sweden (see [Table 1](#)). The focus groups are heterogeneous in terms of background, gender, religion, socioeconomic status and so on, both within each group and in relation to one another. In Schools A and C, the students take the 100-point history course, which is obligatory for preparatory study programmes, whereas the students in School D take the shorter obligatory version for vocational programmes, consisting of 50 points, making their course half the size of the former. The study was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority. The schools have been assigned a letter which represents the pseudonymised names of teachers and students to ensure confidentiality while highlighting context.

Table 1. Information about the data set

School	School A	School C	School D
Teacher	Alison	Caroline	Diana
Location	City	Rural	Rural
Educational topic	Study preparation	Study preparation	Vocational
History course	History 1b (100 points)	History 1b (100 points)	History 1a1 (50 points)
Number of classes observed	3	1	3
Observations in classrooms	4 lessons	1 lesson	4 lessons
Interviews with focus groups, with 3–5 participants in each group	2 groups	1 group	2 groups

The interviews were semi-structured to encourage students to share their thoughts about history education concerning norms, sexuality and relationships. The follow-up questions were constructed during the interviews based on the information they shared (for example, [Brinkmann, 2016](#)). Inspired by [Haraway \(2016\)](#), we consider data as generated, not collected, since the researcher and the students collaboratively construct the empirical data.

The recorded material, that is, the interviews and parts of the lessons, was transcribed and categorised through an iterative process of identifying patterns and themes (for example, [Charmaz, 2006](#)). The focus was on what the students thought was interesting about history and why. The transcribed parts of the lessons included conversations between the teachers and students about history connected to norms, sexuality and relationships. Lesson content that did not include these topics was omitted from transcription. The analysis commenced by identifying key aspects of the data and thoughts from readings of transcripts. The key aspects were systematised into codes, and the codes were then organised into preliminary themes, seeking similarities by creating codes in NVivo. The codes were inductively constructed based on the initial key words, and subsequently analysed. They were then constructed again by merging smaller codes into larger themes, and sometimes splitting the larger themes into smaller codes to make sense of the material (examples of codes include religion, shame, norms, laws, LGBTQ+ and gender roles). During the analytical stage, we identified how shame was both a recurring topic initiated by teachers during their history lessons, and how students in the interviews continued discussing shame in detail. To examine shame in depth, the following analysis concentrated on utterances about shame connected to sexuality. At the end of the analytical stage, the initial codes concerning shame were grouped into two themes, which are explored below.

Findings

In the following sections, excerpts from focus group interviews are presented and analysed. To provide a context regarding the content of the lessons that preceded the interviews, an overview is presented in [Table 2](#).

Table 2. Information about lesson content

	School A	School C	School D
Lesson content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Nineteenth-century views on homosexuality and masturbation – Foucault's views on sexuality – Social norms and legislation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Societal norms and views on sexuality 1900–2010 – The Stonewall Riot – The occupation of the Swedish National Board of Health 1979 – Social norms and legislation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Medieval times to the twentieth century – Baby farmers – The church's impact on people's lives – Social norms and legislation

The findings are structured into two themes: *Shame as regulating women's sexuality* and *Sexualised shame as a historical continuity*. This thematisation first highlights how students connect shame to women's sexuality and, in the second part, illustrates how this connection is brought into the present, establishing it as a continuum.

Shame as regulating women's sexuality

Daniella: Well, it's like, well, men can, men can still sleep around, women can't; it's still like that, still, in today's society. If a man sleeps with many women, he gets cheered and everything, while if a woman does it, everyone will call her a whore or a slut or something like that. That still happens in our society, and I think it comes from this time in history. We still live with it; there are still things that have to change, that 'you're a whore, you're a slut if you do it' kind of thing. That perspective is still around today, and I guess they thought like that back then, 'yeah she is just a prostitute' or something.

This excerpt comes from a focus group interview about history education that incorporates issues related to sexuality and relationships. The discussion in the focus group was about what students find interesting in history, and what dictated rules and norms for men and women in the past. When Daniella made this statement, the students were discussing religion and societal views of women. For Daniella, an upper secondary school student, women's sexuality is connected to shame, in that women may be called names for being sexually active. Shame in relation to women's sexuality works both internally and externally, since women are supposedly considered responsible for what happens in an intimate situation (Bareket et al., 2018; Healicon, 2016). As such, shame is an acknowledgement of responsibility for moral wrongdoing, whether it is articulated or not (Arendt and Kohn, 2003; Zembylas, 2008). According to feminist research about shame and its connection to the patriarchy, shame is internalised to regulate Others and their sexuality, implying that the Othered has failed in some way according to norms (Ahmed, 2014; Bartky, 1990; Christianson et al., 2021; Munt, 2008). Shame is also intertwined with historical/traditional and religious norms for women's sexuality through the recurring and thoroughly analysed Madonna-whore dichotomy; this dichotomy essentially leaves two positions available for women, as either good/chaste or bad/promiscuous (Bareket et al., 2018; Conrad, 2006; Kahalon et al., 2019; Tumanov, 2011). Even though this is connected to Christianity, similar norms are found in all Abrahamic religions (Kretschmer et al., 2024; Saharso et al., 2023). A recurring theme in the data is how women's sexuality has been, and to some extent still is, connected to shame. In particular, the focus is on how shame can be seen as regulating women's sexuality, and on how visible signs of sexual activity are what produce shame. In the focus group interviews analysed in this article, the students use connections and disconnections to history by travelling between times and places, which forms the basis of the investigation of how students and teachers produce and reproduce ideas about sex and sexuality, with a focus on women's sexualities. In the interviews with focus groups in Schools A and C, similar connections are made between women's sexuality and shame.

In a lesson focused on legislation and norms about sexuality in the twentieth century, the teacher, Caroline, used historical data as a starting point. The historical narrative of the lesson involved making norms visible by using examples of how people in their everyday lives were regulated by them, as well as examples of how such norms (and legislation) were challenged and changed. This lesson therefore highlighted subjectivity, action and counteraction, both in the past and the present. The main focus of the lesson was between 1900 and 1970, but some laws that changed after 1970 were also mentioned. The class examined historical advertisements in newspapers for unmarried pregnant mothers seeking accommodation during the 1920s, and they read a letter from a woman describing her views on sex when she was young, and her scepticism about the birth control pill when it was introduced in Sweden in the 1960s. Caroline contextualised this example by highlighting how expectant mothers were shamed for being unmarried. In this way, she established a discourse of shame that regulates women's sexuality.

In the interview with five students after the lesson, they were asked what they thought was interesting during the lesson. Three of them emphasised the unmarried mothers' predicament:

Carin: Yeah, but I'm sure there was, sort of, no going back if you were already pregnant; you had to have the baby, I guess.

Carla: So, you had to make sure to be married; it was like that in those times.

Curt: Yes, you know, they thought that their baby would be a bastard if you weren't married!
[raises his eyebrows]

Carla: No, exactly, it was like the whole family's concern, like 'you are going to destroy the family's reputation if you have a baby without being married', like, I think, they shamed women for it like that.

Carla states that unmarried women were shamed if they were pregnant, following the discourse established by Caroline. Carla here raises shame as the whole family's concern, as the pregnancy itself was a visible testimony of the woman's 'wrongdoing'. In the context of shame connected to having babies out of wedlock, the D-group talked about the infamous Swedish 'baby farmer' Hilda Nilsson, who was sentenced to death in 1917 for taking in unwanted babies and killing them in her home. The historical practice of baby farming was described by the teacher and the students as a practice originating from despair, in response to the disgrace associated with mothering an illegitimate child. Leaving the child to someone else hid the shame. In the teacher's historical narrative, it is implied that the shame regarding premarital sex and babies born out of wedlock is connected to women in history.

The position accessible to women is based on an unequal view of sexuality, where it is implicitly suggested that the woman is responsible for the pregnancy or wrongdoing, since she bears the pregnancy as evidence of the illegitimate sexual interaction (Bartky, 1990; Munt, 2008). Since it is not visible on the man, he is supposedly without guilt in this binary view of shame/no shame, woman/man (Healicon, 2016). This highlights a sexualised hierarchy between men and women, where women are subjugated in relation to men. The students' discussion in the C-group about the unmarried mother shows how the past and present are relationally constructed, where statements such as 'it was like that in those times' simultaneously construct both history and the contemporary. Unmarried mothers are deemed to have been shamed in the past, and the present is implied to be otherwise (Butler, 1990, 1995, 1997). The patriarchy is constructed by the students as something that continues throughout history, but that also changes and diminishes, a sort of multi-chronology, where the past, present and future coexist at the same time (Ammert, 2010). Simultaneously, present gendered norms are reproduced with history as their justifier (Lerner, 1986).

Sexualised shame as a historical continuity

In the interviews with the A-group and D-group of students, the construction of shame in relation to the past and present is discussed in another way. When the students in the A-group and D-group talk about the present, shame is, in fact, present in their discussions, but it is not necessarily named as such. Instead, students such as Amanda and Alissa, for example, talk about the phenomenon of shame in terms of women being policed, treated badly, called names, or bullied in relation to sexual activities. This shows how the students relate historical narratives to their contemporary context. Such a relation is also created by students in the D-group in their discussions about a sequence of lessons led by the teacher, Diana. During the lessons, Diana discussed views in medieval times concerning sexuality, baby farmers during the nineteenth century, and how social norms and legislation were connected to the church and to people's lives, shaming women for bearing illegitimate children. In the interview, the students discuss who among them is able to understand the feeling of shame in the past. Daniella argues that women are more likely to understand sexualised shame as a concept:

Researcher: Do you think it is hard to understand how it was to live back then?

Didrik: Yeah, I have a hard time understanding it at least, but I think it is because of the freedom we have these days, or whatever you should call it.

Daniella: Well, I ... [interrupted by Douglas]

Douglas: If you don't know any better, then you would think that a lot is OK.

Daniella: Well, I, if you go back to this part about being called a whore and stuff like that, I think that girls can understand it better than boys, like, being treated badly and stuff, because there are still people that do it today. There are, like, well, you simply can't count the number of times you have been called that, or, like, that people have tried to take advantage of you, really,

so, as a girl, you can understand it, I think, how the women in the past felt, like, how they were feeling when it happened, and I think that boys will have a harder time understanding that.

Douglas: Mm? [frowns and looks down at the table]

Daniella: But, of course, it happens to them too, but it is women who are called it on a more regular basis, I think; they are the ones being targeted.

Daniella is talking about how women in the present can understand women in the past, since women are still being shamed if they do not take responsibility both for their own and for men's sexuality (Healicon, 2016). Daniella positions herself as a woman who can understand women in the past, whereas she argues that men, like Douglas and Didrik, are not able to understand. Douglas's reaction makes Daniella change her statement slightly, but she keeps her line of argument about how women are (more) able to understand women in the past. When Douglas looks down at the table, Daniella adds that this happens to men too, but then quickly goes back to her previous explanation that women are the ones being targeted on a more regular basis.

In the interview with the D-group, Daniella also mentions that women in the present have to be careful about how many men they sleep with. As such, the students are once again relating the present to the past, highlighting how norms for women's and men's sexualities are still different, since men can sleep with as many as they like, whereas women have to make sure that they are restrictive (Arendt and Kohn, 2003; Healicon, 2016). This discourse maintains a hierarchy where men's space for action regarding sexuality is much greater than women's. This is also an expression of how the Madonna-whore dichotomy is upheld. In order for men to have female partners to sleep around with, there have to be whores, and in order to be a visible Madonna, the woman needs to be different compared to other women positioned as whores. The non-standard makes the standard visible (for example, Butler, 1990), and functions as a way of regulating women's sexuality.

During the interview with students in the A-group, following a lesson where the teacher, Alison, talked about masturbation and homosexuality, Amanda and Alissa were asked if they thought that norms have changed much since the nineteenth century. They addressed the issue of women's sexual shame in the present:

Amanda: There are norms today too, I mean, it's like this, among teenagers too. Let's say a girl goes around and has sex with several guys, then there is still shame on her. I mean, the shame is still there today, and if guys do it, they are celebrated if they sleep with many girls, so that type of thing is still, well, it's half changed, but it's still there. You don't get executed for having sex, but there is still a kinda, a whole group that police it, and now we have the internet too, so you get bullied online, and it's more psychological now than before.

Alissa: Yeah, I agree with you. I feel like it's really easy for a girl's reputation to get smeared, and with the internet it spreads really quickly too.

In this excerpt, the students connect shame to women's sexuality, given that a girl's reputation can be tarnished if she does not adhere to the norms. Shame connected to sex can be understood as shame on unequal terms for men and women. If a woman's actions break the norms, by, for example, sleeping with too many men or using her sexuality on her own terms instead of on patriarchal terms, the shame is hers (Arendt and Kohn, 2003; Bartky, 1990; Christianson et al., 2021). In the interviews, shame connected to women's sexuality is not only constructed as a question of the past; it is also brought into the present, since the students state that girls and women are still responsible for their sexuality and reputation, which makes the Madonna-whore dichotomy contemporary in relation to women's sexuality (Bareket et al., 2018).

Furthermore, students also highlight the possibility of connecting the past and the present when engaging with issues of shame and sexuality in relation to their own identity positions, such as a personal relationship to religion:

Asmee: Well, you could be punished for sex, and, like, if you are born a bit after 2000, then you would think 'that's sick!', but when we come from a background that takes religion very seriously, we can understand why people thought as they did back then. But I think it is unfair

that religion is applied to everything and everyone, even Christians or Muslims or others, but maybe they took religion more seriously back then. Today it's not like that, well, it depends on where in the world you live too, but, like, our background in the Middle East ...

Asmee contemplates that she (and her classmate Abdul) are able to understand the importance of religion, as they (by their own statements) come from a background where religion is important. According to Abdul and Asmee, their classmates who were born in Sweden are not able to understand it in the same way, since most of them grew up in secularised homes. In the excerpt above, Asmee sees a connection between history and the present that she and Abdul can understand, and assumes that their classmates are unable to empathise with it. Asmee positions herself and Abdul as different from their classmates of Swedish heritage by highlighting how they are able to grasp the historical connection between sexuality, religion and norms.

The connection between identity, religion, norms, society and sexuality is also present in an interview with one of the D-groups. The students were asked why there are norms for sexuality and where they think the norms come from:

Researcher: But why is it like that?

Devin: I think it is because of religion!

Damian: Yeah, within Christianity, it's like, to have a child you need sex, and sex outside wedlock wasn't accepted by the church, so if you wanted a kid, you needed to be married.

Researcher: So, your bets are on religion?

Devin: [laughs] Oh my God, yes, and religion has, like, been a really big deal throughout history; it's just now during the twenty-first century that it's starting to ease up a bit. We don't have the same ideas today, about, I mean, in Sweden, it's not that controlled any more, if you compare to other countries where religion controls more, but religion in Sweden, it's starting to tone down. The church doesn't have the same power as before, and there are a lot of rules in religion; it has put a perspective on how to live and stuff, how to do things, like, if you had sex before marriage, it was a sin, and if you sin, you end up in hell so ... you know ... [does a rolling movement with his hands moving forward and tilting his head forward to the right]

The D-group elaborates on how religion and societal norms have changed over time, thereby positioning the past and present in relation to one another. Devin states that religion has been a controlling factor in relation to sexuality in the past, thereby also implying that it is not an influential factor any more. It is suggested that religion is especially connected to women's sexuality, since the woman bears the proof of the illegitimate sexual interaction afterwards, if she gets pregnant, connecting the D-group's discussions to similar connections made by the C-group, as discussed in the section regarding shame as regulating women's sexuality.

Concluding remarks

The content in the studied teaching may be historical, but a prominent thread running through the findings is the continuous presence of the present, evident in the classroom conversations and in the student interviews. The teachers discussed views on sexuality from medieval times up to the present day, religious views on sexuality, social norms and legislation, demonstrations against legislation, and how norms have impacted everyday lives. The students often related the content to their own lives. One of the teachers even explicitly sought to challenge problematic societal masculine norms expressed in her classroom through the use of historical examples. Previous research has discussed how teaching about sex and sexuality in the past opens up possibilities for students to more easily partake in the discussion, as they can choose how much of their own lives they relate it to. The disconnection created by the historical distancing thereby makes another connection possible, as claimed by [Fisher et al. \(2017\)](#). The excerpts analysed in this article illustrate how the students use this connection and disconnection as a basis for (re)producing ideas about sexuality and shame. The students repeatedly make connections between the history teaching and their own lives. However, not all students do this as strongly. In the focus

group interviews, it is girls who claim an ability to empathise with women in the past. The same goes for students with religious upbringings, who claim an ability to understand the role of religion in the Swedish past, and empathise with how people in the past related to religion. In several groups interviewed, the students connect religion to women's sexuality. This could be further investigated in relation to historical empathy, where more research is needed. It is noteworthy, however, how these students use an analytical approach to the past built on their own experiences. This becomes particularly pertinent in the case of the girls, who strongly claim that the boys in the focus group are unable to understand the situation of historical women. As such, a prerequisite for this ability to connect with the oppressed women of the past is to have at least some personal experiences of the disadvantages of living and acting in a comparable societal structure. Hence, the way historical empathy is enacted by the students in this study, by linking the history of shame and sexuality to their own experiences, relies on enduring societal structures. Investigating the enactment of historical empathy in teaching about sex and sexuality in a way that is not limited to 'teaching for the other' (Kumashiro, 2002) thus puts high demands on the teachers' ability to navigate the complexity of RSE as a field where history, politics, natural science, culture and market-oriented concerns meet (for example, Planting-Bergloo et al., 2021). The students construct the patriarchy as a continuum through history, which changes with society by time and place. We argue that this highlights a sort of multi-chronology, together with the gendered norms which are reproduced and justified by the students through history.

On the most fundamental level, the analysed teaching could be said to challenge the grand (patriarchal) narratives of traditional historiography, by showcasing the lives of women. An important driving force in the teaching is the focus on individualised case studies (such as the example of a particular baby farmer). Most certainly, this illuminates individuals and groups of individuals who typically have been made invisible in history teaching. Nonetheless, the women who have made an imprint in historical sources are the ones who, in some way, were perceived as deviant or extraordinary by their contemporaries. This leaves little room for a historiography that naturally includes those who are not in positions of power. Consequently, it is highly demanding for a history teacher to construe classroom teaching that breaks with traditional historiography without falling into a fragmentation of history as isolated case studies of the spectacular (such as baby farming). The Madonna-whore dichotomy, similar to norms for women in other religions, is upheld by connecting women's sexuality to their reputation, which limits women. The sexualised hierarchy between men and women is reinforced; however, it is also questioned by both teachers and students. Further research is needed to understand how teachers can practise history education that questions and changes norms for men, women and non-binary people.

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Open data and materials availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author but restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license for the current study, and so are not publicly available. Data are however available from the authors upon reasonable request and with permission of the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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