

Lisa Scheer & Susanne Kink-Hampersberger

Queer STS Forum contributions as course assignment



Susanne Kink-Hampersberger is a sociologist. She researches and teaches in the areas of sociology of gender and education, gender and diversity, social inequality, and school development. She is currently a University College Lecturer for Sociology of Education at the University College of Teacher Education Styria.



Lisa Scheer holds a doctorate in sociology and currently works at the Competence Center for University Teaching at the University of Graz. Her tasks include teacher training, knowledge management and organizational development with a special focus on anti-discriminatory teaching and learning, teaching reflection and design-based research.

This short paper serves as an introduction to several student contributions which are published in this Forum. On the following pages, we briefly describe the course and present a few reflections which can be useful for fellow teachers but also editors who wish to attract diverse contributors.

The course

In summer 2023, we held the seminar “Equality policies from affirmative action to intersectional mainstreaming” at the University of Graz, a mandatory seminar in the master programme Gender Studies. Among the 21 students were mostly those from the MA Gender Studies, but also a few students from other BA and MA programmes such as Global Studies and Pedagogy who took it as an elective. As intended learning outcomes for the course we listed that students should be able to

- name and describe underlying equality policies based on different problem formulations,
- know different equality policies and link appropriate measures with them,
- design concepts for the implementation of gender equality and diversity measures,
- link their own professional and leisure experiences with what they have learned,

- analyse their practical experiences with regard to the underlying equality policies, find best practices, formulate gaps and think about further development.

We had the impression that the Queer STS Forum 2023 call on Queer-Feminist Inclusion and Visibility met with what was covered in our seminar and with what students were supposed to learn. Additionally, we like including ‘real’ assignments: projects with outcomes that are viewed by a larger, class-external audience, that have practical relevance or can directly be used outside of class. Such assignments usually increase students’ motivation. Therefore, we included contributing to the Forum as one of three larger assignments, crediting it 20% of the overall course grade.

In one of the classes, we presented the call text, discussed on how it could be understood and let student brainstorm and exchange first ideas. We then gave them a deadline to hand in abstracts so that we can provide feedback and guide students in their assignment work. How students first reacted to the call, how they realised the assignment and what learnings we as teachers and forum editors can draw, is presented in the next section.

Observations and reflections

At first, the students were irritated and put off by the call. They found it very difficult to understand, needed time to digest it and to come up with ideas. We experience insecurity and uncertainty about the correct interpretation and understanding as rather common reactions to assignments and exercises in Austrian higher education settings. This can be explained by a dominating assessment culture in which contributions of any kind are quickly evaluated and mistakes are seen as negative and problematic rather than as learning opportunities. In addition, students’ first reaction to the call provides important feedback to editors, especially to the Queer STS working group members who serve as Forum editors. If we aim at inviting diverse contributors, also from outside academia, we must reflect on the style of our call and especially on the language we use. Taking students’ reactions seriously, the 2023 call text (and most likely previous ones too) was quite complex and demanding – certainly not very inclusive and barrier-free. We should reflect further on purposes and intentions of our call texts and providing a call in plain language in the future in order to attract further contributors and to minimize scaring interested people off.

Already when receiving the abstracts, we were impressed by the great ideas our students had. This positive impression continued when receiving the contributions: From drawings and poems through posters and (video) interviews to visions and short analysis of queer-feminist inclusion and visibility examples student covered a broad span of topics and styles. We take this variety in contributions as a positive effect of a broad call text and an openly formulated assignment and believe it allowed students to either try out new creative ways of tackling a topic or choose known formats, letting each student

decide on how far they wanted to go regarding creativity and experimentation. Despite its positivity, there is also one downside: grading such a diverse range of contributions. Since it was hard to apply the same criteria to all the contributions, we decided to grade them quite mild and not be too critical about them. This led us to realize that further joint reflections on and conceptualisations of creative assignment grading criteria and practices are needed.

In the end, not all students wanted their contribution published in the Forum. Some would have needed small revisions but did not have the time during summer, others did not want to put in further resources for a translation from German to English. Two students did not feel comfortable sharing their very creative and rather personal contributions. These observations point at additional challenges in higher education such as limited student resources and limiting semester structures.

Overall and looking back, we were glad that we included the Forum contribution in our course and assignment structure because we believe it fostered student learning, it let them choose their level of creativity, and it motivated them because they contributed to a 'real' format that is openly accessible and read by many people – definitely by more than just their instructors which is usually the case with student assignments.

Stefanie Reinthaler & Meike Steinberg

Visibility and Inclusion

Introduction

The words visibility and inclusion, their interplay, and especially their role in activism are becoming increasingly significant. The visualization of experiences of discrimination has the potential to bring previously invisible experiences into the spotlight and dismantle barriers to inclusion through lived and narrated experiences of exclusion. Particularly in feminist activism, there is a striving to consider and tell intersectional and multidimensional experiences of discrimination in order to make them visible and create safe spaces for individuals through measures and concepts. In this interview with Eva Taxacher (E) held on June 12th, 2023 by Meike Steinberg (M) and Stefanie Reinthaler (S), we attempt to define the terms visibility and inclusion and illustrate how they are employed in practice.

S: I would like to thank you once again, and we are very happy that you took the time for us. Would you please introduce yourself briefly, regarding your education, career choices and so on?

E: My name is Eva Taxacher. My pronouns are preferably none, or in the context of working in a women's organization, also she and her. I studied sociology and later pursued a part-time master's degree in International Gender Studies and Feminist Politics. In recent years, I have increasingly focused on facilitation, coaching, and organizational consulting, but for our conversation, my sociology studies and the International Gender Studies and Feminist Politics are probably more of interest. I have been working at the WomenService Graz for ten years. So we are almost the same age. The WomenService was founded in 1984 and is one year younger than me and will turn forty next year.

S: So, in this call, it's ultimately about the visualization of inclusion, especially in practical terms. And if you had come across the call on your own, would you have felt addressed by it, would you have connected it to yourself and the WomenService in any way?

E: It would have definitely caught my attention, but I don't think I would have thought of submitting anything. And I believe that's because from the perspective of an organization like the WomenService, all our doing is about inclusion and social justice. However, the term "queer-feminist" is not something that immediately comes to mind as something that specifically concerns us.

S: How would you define visible queer-feminist inclusion? Because these are two very broad terms, and based on what we have heard about the call, there is a lot that can be done with them since the call is quite wide-ranging.

E: Well, thinking these two terms together ("inclusion" and "queer-feminist") is actually harder for me than other terms related to visibility or social justice. I wonder why that is. I haven't been able to read the call in depth, but if we were to reverse the interview, I would ask you what exactly is meant by queer-feminist inclusion?

S: Well, when I think of feminist, I immediately think that feminism is no longer just about the equality of men and women. It has become much broader and includes the classical concept of intersectionality. It encompasses all feminist concerns, addressing marginalized groups where some individuals face discrimination, some multiple times. It's not just about making marginalized women visible but all marginalized individuals.

E: And what makes it queer-feminist?

S: The term queer is somehow intertwined with that from my perspective. Queer, to put it cautiously, is everything that deviates from the norm or what the majority of people consider as the norm. It doesn't necessarily refer only to sexuality or being non-heterosexual, but also encompasses – I'm missing the term right now – but generally, it means that queer and feminist are not limited to women but also include marginalized groups in general. The aim is to integrate them and make them visible, incorporating them into projects and drawing attention to the issues they face. That's my thought on it. What about you, Meike?

M: Similarly, by focusing on queer people, it highlights a group that might not be visible in research, even though it's already included in the feminist perspective as you mentioned, especially if we consider it as intersectional. It's good to emphasize it because queer people often remain invisible in research, for example, due to surveys being designed for the inclusion of binary genders only. So, it's important to highlight the significance of inclusion and give it a name to ensure that all people, regardless of gender, sexuality, or self-identification, become visible in research.

S: Exactly, especially in research, like with the Gender Data Gap, the classic example where car airbags are designed for white middle-aged men, which can be life-threatening for individuals with different body types. It's crucial to be visible in research. Do you have anything to add or any further thoughts on this?

E: Yes, I've had some Aha moments while you were talking. One thing is that much of what you described would already be covered for me by the term feminist. And then my biggest realization was actually that, for me, I believe that the terms queer and inclusion don't really go together. Of course, it depends on how one understands the term inclusion, but often it is used in the sense of personnel policies, hiring practices, addressing diverse target groups, it is about integration. While the goal of "queer", for me, is not integration into an existing system but rather doing something radically different. That's why I think I'm drawn to this term individually, but it gets entangled in combination, and I find that really interesting. I find that really fascinating.

S: I think the term queer is really difficult to define somehow.

E: That's the good thing about it. Another question could be, how inclusive is the term queer?

S: We have at least started an attempt at defining visible queer-feminist inclusion. Earlier you mentioned your master's studies. To what extent was the inclusion and exclusion of people in research a topic there in general? Because the call is very much oriented towards activism and really taking active measures or having programs, but how does it look like in research?

E: Well, in my master's thesis, I dealt with an archive, where it was very much about the question of inclusion and exclusion and whose history and materials were documented there. Moreover, it was an archive that attempted to document the history of the women's movement in Graz/Styria. So, what happened in archives in general was always focused on specific aspects, like: Who is actually meant by women's history? What I'm interested in is this distinction and specificity of fields. So, as you asked me, would this call have appealed to me if I had found it? And my answer is, I find it interesting, but no, it probably wouldn't have appealed to me in the sense that I could submit something as WomenService or Gender workshop. And that's the distinction between science and

socially engaged institutions and projects which work very, very practically oriented. We have something like an activist scene, people who don't get paid, whereas we all here at WomenService do (there is a small project where volunteers also work). And yes, that's something I'm thinking about a lot: there are many people dealing with feminist issues, visibility issues, inclusion, social justice, and queer topics. But where are the intersections and what can we do together? And there is still a lot of room for improvement. And trying to do something about it was with the founding of Women's Action Forum. I don't know if you've heard about it? It has been around since 2016, and there were eight or nine of us from different fields and areas: artists, activists, employees of women's organizations, academics. So, we created forums to bring together the various actors. And it's working well and is important, but there still needs to be happening more.

S: Referring again to this archive story: Which stories are primarily told?

E: Well, it's not an easy question to answer. The archive that I researched, the archive of DOKU Graz (Women's Documentation and Project Center) was an organization that existed from the late 1980s until 2011, I believe. I studied their collecting practices. And the result is that there is always a specific, very particular image of who is an actor in this field, who is considered part of the local women's movement, what does "feminist" mean. And these ideas manifest in what is being collected and what is being left out.

M: We found on the WomenService website that you are a coordinator for the course "Gender and Diversity Competence for Scientists" at the Technical University (TU) Graz. What is taught in the course, and what experiences have you had during the course or in creating the course? And how do you see it in relation to the call?

E: A colleague from TU, from the Office for Gender Equality and Equal Opportunity, Armanda Pilinger, approached the Gender workshop to jointly design this course, based on the course that the Gender workshop has been offering for a wider public since 2004. This regular course already has decades of experience in how to build it best, the flow of modules and content, as well as the cooperation and collaboration of the staff, the lecturers who lead these modules. An essential point, for example, is that we always work in pairs, simply to have more eyes on the participant group, both in terms of process and content. In the course we specifically designed for TU, there is a focus on specific aspects. The first two modules are an introduction to diversity and an introduction to what gender means in research and technology. Then there are in-depth modules on research, teaching, and team work and personnel selection. I find the experiences in these courses and with the participants really encouraging. Encouraging in the sense that these are people who will shape the future with their expertise and knowledge in their respective fields. So, everything related to technological innovations, software, and all these highly complex topics that we laypeople have no idea about —

if there are people with gender and diversity competencies involved, it's really reassuring because many of the maldevelopments we have experienced and are experiencing might be reduced.

They will really make a difference. At the end of the course, the participants, in the regular course and at the TU course do a thesis, a practical work where they are asked to integrate and implement the course content into their respective field of work, their research or teaching. I remember one colleague, who did research in her field. She is an architect, and the history of architecture, like many disciplines, is male-dominated. She then designed her own course on female architects and the role that women in Graz have played in architecture. So, it was more like a historical exploration, which connects to our topic of visibility. Another colleague dealt with representation. I believe that at the TU, for each field of study on the website, there are image photos where you can see a person holding or doing something typical for the field of study. She studied these photos and did a visual analysis, questioning who is represented. The result: they are all young, almost all white, very attractive, and conforming to body norms and beauty standards, with an above-average number of women. But here we come to the dilemma: Do we want to depict reality, which would show far fewer women, or do we want to depict the women present, so that more women will also come here? Especially when it comes to visibility and representation, there is no one right answer. A little sidestep regarding visibility: it's currently Pride Month (June), and I'm even wearing a rainbow belt. But at the same time, I feel uneasy when institutions, like Magenta and A1 and all the trams of the Graz Holding Company, display rainbow flags. Because I know that still, I believe two-thirds or of people who identify as homosexual are not “out” at their workplace. We still don't have full recognition and antidiscrimination laws regarding sexual orientations in Austria. And that is a reality that is distorted or made invisible by this rainbow flag display.

M: Is the course primarily for students, or is it for researchers who are employed?

E: It is primarily for scientific personnel with the consideration of sensitizing young scientists at a point in their career where they will continue to pursue and support gender and diversity competence throughout their careers.

M: We've already touched on the Gender workshop. I wanted to ask again, in a general sense, what is the Gender workshop, and how is queer-feminist inclusion and visibility practiced there? What are their goals? What are the challenges? And how does the team deal with it?

E: The Gender workshop is a collaboration between the association WomenService Graz and the Association for Men's and Gender Issues in Styria. This collaboration started in 2001 when Gender Mainstreaming was mandated as an EU directive, and the colleagues from these two genders-specific organizations thought about what it actually

means for them. How can they make something out of it? And that's how the Gender workshop was born. It has been around for more than 20 years now, and the team has partly changed over time. Some people have been there from the beginning, and there is also a relatively large group that is new, including considerations of visibility and expertise. The Gender workshop is an expert working group where individuals work either in one of the organizations or work independently as lecturers, presenters, or facilitators, and with different competences. Currently, we are a team of 13 people, many of whom teach in one or both of these courses. But we also receive inquiries from social and educational institutions for workshops or in-house trainings. Our experience has been that in recent years, due to changes in the Civil Status Act, where there are now not just two options for gender registration but six, there is a lot of interest in topics such as trans issues, queer issues, gender diversity, non-binary perspectives. Therefore, we have also tried to incorporate these topics within our team. As for visibility, for example, on the Gender workshop website, some individuals have their preferred pronouns mentioned, while others don't. I believe it makes people think, it creates some irritation, but also provides an opportunity.

M: What are the challenges and how do you deal with them?

E: The challenge we face in working with the groups we primarily engage with is that there is a simultaneity of different experiences. There is a growing group that already has a lot of knowledge about gender and diversity, is familiar with the terms and abbreviations, and has high expectations of us as lecturers. But there are also participants who have fewer theoretical knowledge, and if we were to communicate only with the knowledgeable group, we would lose those. So, the challenge in workshop settings is to design content and exercises in a way that, ideally, participants benefit from each other by realizing what concerns each of them. It's about creating educational settings that are inclusive and non-dogmatic, where people can open up, can struggle and deal with gender and diversity issues in a brave space, where they find encouragement and the insight there isn't one right answer to complex questions. As one of my colleagues, Michael Kurzmann, would say: "The world is complex and so are we". This is something that we reflect on and discuss a lot within the Gender workshop team. For example, we discuss how to introduce the topic of preferred pronouns, whether it should be a norm or not, as it may require people to disclose their own pronouns. Personally, I have mixed feelings about it because there are contexts where it should not about me. But as soon as I say that being a woman is not my preferred identity, it becomes an issue that may distract from the participants topic. So, there is no definitive answer to what the right approach is.

S: So, it also relates back to the issue of visibility we discussed earlier regarding the TU. How can we build something that is effective in raising awareness but not off-putting for some who may resist the idea of pronouns, for example?

M: Do you have any ideas or suggestions on how science could become more inclusive? Because you already have experience with scientists from TU Graz in various contexts through the courses and working with different people. What would be an idea of how it could work?

E: Saving the world? (laughs) Well, I believe the most crucial point is the issue of the inheritance of educational qualifications in Austria. This is not directly related to queer visibility, but it has to do with an intersectional understanding of who is represented in universities. Working-class children simply have a much more challenging start. The probability of attending a university, let alone having a career there, is much lower for them. And there is still a lot to be done on every level, I would say. The understanding of what makes a good scientist is an excellent example. There is a great book by a sociologist and colleague, Sandra Beaufaÿs, called "How Are Scientists Made?" (Wie werden Wissenschaftler (sic!) gemacht) It shows that a lot of what is expected of a scientist is male-coded. This is not specifically related to queer visibility, but it has to do with the compatibility of family, personal life, and profession. Universities have a very elitist, exclusive attitude in terms of who can work passionately and voluntarily for 60 hours or more per week. This is only possible if there are people who take on the care work, and often these are women from Eastern European countries or from the Global South. Thus, a chain of injustices continues, a global care chain, and it applies not only to universities or TU Graz but to society as a whole. It is important for couples, regardless of their gender constellation, to share unpaid work fairly. The slogan of the former Minister for Women in 1994¹, "Full fledged men share 50/50" ("Ganze Männer machen halbe-halbe) is still very relevant. There is a re-traditionalization that is associated with legal regulations on when and how much parental leave can be taken, the fact that men earn more and are expected to work, while women are expected to stay at home. So, it's a big, complex issue that needs to be addressed.

M: And as a final question, how is the relationship between scientific theory and practice? Is there potential for better collaboration in the future between theorists and those with practical experience?

E: If I knew the solution, I would have already implemented it, but I think there are good examples of mutual recognition, acknowledging each other's strengths and finding ways to integrate them. There are many good examples of this. For instance, in the field of pedagogy, they often invite practitioners from the WomenService to their lectures, and they sit in the WomenService library or attend events at the Infocafé Palaver with my colleague to see what it looks like in practice. I believe that's very important, and it can be applied to any context. In many research projects, they already consider implementation in practice, and there are many practitioners who are eager to share their

¹ Johanna Dohnal

experiences. Of course, it's also a question of resources. There is often interest from universities, for example, to collaborate with the WomenService. But then the question arises: How do we allocate resources? Yes, the motto is probably the recognition of diversity. If we talk about the issue of simultaneity and non-simultaneity, there might be a gap between theoretical development and practice, both in gender research and, I believe, in more technology-oriented fields of study. Practitioners often feel that what is produced in theory is not applicable to their work. This requires some kind of translation between the two. It's great to have innovative thinking and concepts like cyborgs, for example, inspired by Donna Haraway's work. But in practice, it's not always straightforward, and practitioners may still be dealing with the same issues as forty years ago, counselling women on how to achieve financial independence, how to leave a violent partner, how to manage a living as single parent. This creates a fundamental dilemma. One cannot exist without the other. And it's essential to be aware that practice is often more challenging, less subtle and rougher than we would like it to be. That's not a very optimistic ending, but it's the reality.



Stefanie Reinthaler is a master's student in political economics at the University of Graz. In the future, she wants to focus her research on the field of feminist economics and specifically engage with economic research on the topic of care work.

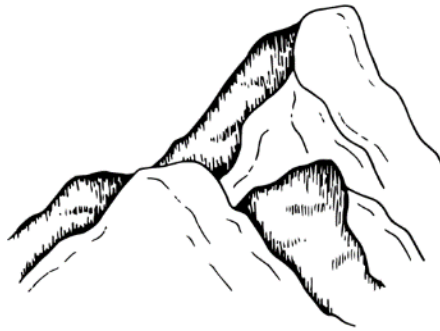


Meike Steinberg is a master's student in political economics at the University of Graz. In her specialization courses, she decided to not only study traditional subjects in economic theory and empirical applications but also to focus on diversity and gender. This choice aims to broaden her perspective and deepen her understanding of how economics, diversity and gender interact.

Lea Ostendorf

I want to go and ask the mountains: How to start a garden? From permaculture to overcoming stories of invisibility.

Mountain! How do I start a garden?



Mountains do not speak, but we can listen to what they say. I personally learned this through a permaculture project in Aotearoa (New Zealand), which was managed by a Maori named Lisa. What I learned there was gained through experience, and I continued learning about permaculture in Austria (although more through my mind than my body). The following are questions that made sense to me regarding overcoming invisibility, along with answers from a permaculture perspective. I took a walk through the landscape, which is not a garden yet, and interviewed myself. This is an initial inquiry, involving questioning, contemplating possible answers, making mistakes, underlining, and using exclamation and question marks in the hope of sparking some answers or good questions.

Could you explain briefly what permaculture is?

I would say that permaculture is a way of thinking. The idea is to create self-sustaining systems. The term "permaculture" was coined by Bill Mollison, but the principles behind it have indigenous origins. Mollison asked, "How can we survive on this planet?" and then looked at indigenous cultures, as well as patterns of nature to understand how they sustain themselves². In short, I would describe permaculture as a truly circular economy, most commonly seen in permaculture gardens that are built to provide food for people.

² Simmons, I. G. (1980). Permaculture One: A Perennial Agriculture for Human Settlement, by B. Mollison & David Holmgren

How is knowledge obtained in a permaculture system?

Permaculture first takes a long look at what is actually present in the system and what it needs. Then comes the "how." With permaculture, I have learned to think in circles, considering relationships and seeing the bigger picture. I've learned a lot about plants and animals, but the most valuable thing was learning how to ask questions. I begin with the assumption that I know nothing about the system I want to change. I consult all the people, animals, wind, and soil. Permaculture asks questions like, "How is the mouse? How does it move through this particular piece of land?" As we know, diversity makes a system resilient; we want to have as many different beings in this system as possible. To achieve this, we need to ask: "What are the needs of these beings? And what are these beings giving back to the system? And which gifts and needs align?" A huge part is understanding the relationships between the beings in the system, strengthen them and creating new ones. What permaculture also adds is a timeframe which goes beyond what we usually think of. We ask: "How does this element change over the years, and by years, I mean a time frame of 10 to 20 to 50 to 100, 200 years? Can I build it in a way that is adjustable to change? What happens if we take the humans out of the system?"

I would like to talk about how value is defined in a permaculture system.

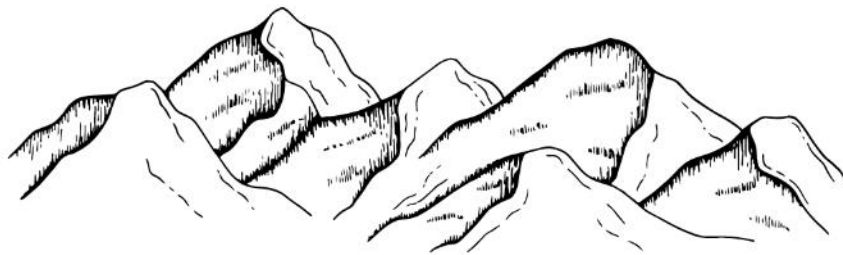
In permaculture, value is defined differently. Changes are made only when necessary and after careful consideration. We may question whether something is useful, but the crucial point is that in a balanced ecosystem, many things are useful that may not directly benefit humans. When we ask this question, we are fully aware that something may not be useful to us, but it plays a vital role in sustaining the ecosystem we inhabit. For instance, a flower may hold value for a different being in the system, and therefore, it has value to me. Since humans are a part of the systems we create and we want humans to stay in this system, live and thrive in it, we also give value to things humans like. Here comes a curtail point to me, because we also value energy a lot (in order to be sustainable we want the system to be as much self-reliant as possible), we do not want to create things that are not going to add to a sustained joy or not going to add to adequately fulfill the needs of the humans in the system. To achieve this, we must honestly address questions related to needs, desires, wishes, wants, can-dos, and cannot-dos. If our answers are not truthful, the system will not work. It is as simple as that. Or complex actually.

What answers does permaculture have to the question: How can we overcome stories of invisibility?

It might seem like nothing novel, but I think learning to listen is the answer permaculture holds for us. Also, learning to take things slow in order to give the complexity of our reality its space. Giving space to ask a lot of questions and then giving space to be confused. We simply ask everything in the system, "What do you need, and where do

you have overflow you can share?" Thinking of the complexity of our social systems and stories of invisibility, permaculture does not translate so easily. On a human level, I have had very different experiences in systems (mostly gardens or households) that used permaculture techniques in cultivating food. In some, I and the other humans involved got to be freer versions of ourselves, got to discover ourselves, each other, and life, and be held by the community and the land around us at the same time. In some, I met homophobic and racist people believing in conspiracy ideology. And still, what I have experienced opened up a lot for me, and I know it has for others as well. Living in a system where you get to experience the interconnectedness of your own life with the ecosystem around you changed how I think and feel in the world. I think in terms of species invisibility, economy, and sustainability, permaculture holds a lot of answers. In terms of social systems it is not so clear. As I said at the beginning, this is a first inquiry, so I will leave not completely satisfied with my answer, knowing I can come back any-time.

And maybe we have to ask some more mountains.



Lea Ostendorf is a yoga teacher, youth sex educator, permaculture designer and has a bachelor's degree in psychology. The central theme of her work is the question how we can enter into healthier relationships with ourselves, others and our environment.

Kerstin Brysch & Katharina Wesselkamp

Diversity@WKO

DIVERSITY@WKO

Portrait based on an interview with a teacher of the Diversity-Working group (WG) at the Wilhelm-Kaisen-Oberschule (WKO) Bremen

Foundation of the WG

"My motivation at that time was that there was an unbelievable amount of trans- and homophobia in my 8th grade class and I just wanted to talk to the older students who I knew were queer."

So in the summer of 2021, the teacher met with two of her students with queer backgrounds to find out what the students needed, what is problematic and what is important to them. It was not their initial goal to establish a working group. The "Diversity@WKO" was founded by pure coincidence, when two days later other students approached her and expressed their wish to participate in the working group, which did not exist at that time.



Growing of the WG

At the WKO, the concept of WGs does not actually exist. Diversity@WKO has therefore also spread exclusively by word of mouth. This was also a protective mechanism. People who want to participate must know someone from the WG. This is an attempt to protect against people who might be hostile or attack, while also striving not to create excessive obstacles for those who are genuinely interested. In the course of the school year 2021/22, the teaching staff was also informed by means of postcards and information flyers, and students were specifically approached. All of a sudden, a group of people from grades 6-10 appeared and even students who had already left the school continue to come to events.

"But we urgently need and want to be a kind of safe space, within the framework of how safe as possible it can be at school. That means for us it was important that if someone wants to join the WG, it must be through someone who is already in the WG".

Topics

"For us, it's just that we also want to talk about things that concern us, where we also have knowledge. We also have neurodivergent people with us in the working group who share their knowledge with us in this regard, people from different cultural backgrounds, different origins in social terms, so we end up with a diverse group that wants to deal with all the issues of diversity."

Discussions also focus on these topics:
Desire of gender neutral restrooms
Vandalism at toilets
Raising a rainbow flag at the school




Sensibility & Allies

"First, we always tell our pronouns when we meet. We also have students who have to live with their dead name at school, unfortunately for a variety of reasons, which in this case, why the dead name is still there, can be traced back to the parents, but we always work with the names and pronouns with which the students want to be addressed and there is a high sensitivity for this. There are very, very many allies who are really in this WG because they say 'I want to support you. I want to be there. I am there for my friends. I am simply there for this person and would like to participate in this WG.'"



Activities and projects

Catcalls of Bremen and CSD

 @catcallsofbrmn

Catcalling is also an issue at the school. A year ago, the WG wanted to address this issue. In this context, a student reported about a workshop that was offered by catcallsofbrmn at a school. The WKO became the second school where such a workshop was organized. Students from grades 7-10 (12-17 years olds) participated. It was shocking to see what these young people experienced in terms of sexual harassment, insults, shouting after and (verbal) attacks.

In the preparation of the workshop, the wish was expressed that experienced catcalls at school would be chalked up. Since this was not allowed, they used an endless paper roll to write down their experiences. *"And that, in the end, was our version to show: Hey, also these young people, which was denied them, and also at this school, in the schoolyard catcalls happen."*

The WG also met outside of school at Christopher Street Day in Bremen and participated in the parade.





Financial support

The WG was announced by the teacher for financial support from a reading foundation. The WG was selected and received 300 euros, which is used for the purchase of various literature for which a lending system has already been developed.

Some of the parents are also incredibly enthusiastic about the WG and provided 150 euros to the WG.

Teaching staff & Conflicts

The project is supported by the staff and the school management also shows a positive development in regard to the topic.

The working group is jointly led by two teachers, one school social worker and one trainee teacher. Since sensitive topics are discussed, the teacher emphasizes the importance of having several contact persons. The students manage to distinguish well between her as a teacher and the WG leader. She herself also sees it as "an excellent addition to my role as - in the end - an evaluating person." Nevertheless, it is valuable to have a person in the team who is not in an evaluation situation with the students.

The WG is described as a very conflict-free group, also despite the diversity of the students (social origin, age, gender identity, etc.). There is an incredibly respectful exchange and conflict management in which problematic situations are addressed, listened to and solutions are found in an appreciative manner.



"A very big wish of ours would be to have a real safe space where you can withdraw, where there is peace and quiet, where we have materials that you can use to sometimes get out of the line of fire, so to speak, when things get tough in some classes or teaching situations."



Kerstin Brysch is a social worker who has worked with traumatized women and is now studying for a Master's degree in Gender Studies at the Ruhr University in Bochum. Within the study program, one semester was spent at the University of Graz as part of a double-degree.



Katharina Wesselkamp completed her bachelor's degree in social work/social pedagogy at the University of Applied Sciences in Düsseldorf, specializing in human rights and health. Since then, she worked in the social psychiatric field and is currently studying Gender Studies at the Ruhr University in Bochum. As part of a double-degree program, one semester was spent studying at the University of Graz.

Carla Camps Santasusana, Jakob Fesca & Jacqueline Schöttler

Thinking about queer Christian religion: *Mama bears*

Mama bears – the Documentary

The documentary *mama bears* was made by Emmy award-winning director Daresha Kyi and followed mothers of the mama bears movement for over six years. Filming began on 13 May 2017 (Instagram mamabearsdoc 20.06.2023) and specifically features mothers Sara Cunningham, Kimberley Shappley and Tammi Terrel Morris with their queer children (Instagram Crossroads, 16.05.2023). The other people involved in the production, including brief biographical introductions, can be viewed at mamabearsdoc.com. Within the production team there is a racial diversity as well as a queer person as impact producer that we want to emphasise.

The documentary accompanies the aforementioned people who have exchanged and networked via the Facebook group *mama bears* and have since been leading the fight for the rights of their queer children together with other members of the group (Instagram crossroads 16.05.2023). The mothers themselves grew up in conservative fundamentalist Christian families and continued to live this faith until they were confronted with the outings of their children. At first, they could not reconcile these outings with their faith. They sought advice and support in the Facebook group *mama bears*, where they could exchange with other believing mothers of queer children. This group was founded in 2014 by Liz Dyer, who states on the *mama bears* website that it was her dream to make the world a little safer and kinder and whose dream has now come true (Mama Bears 2019). Partly before that, partly through the exchange, the portrayed mothers learned to accept their children and since then they have actively decided to love their children just as they are. Many of these mothers, in addition to networking in the Facebook group, have become politically active and are now activists who fight for their children's rights and/or support them in their fight for their rights. *Mama bears* now exist across the United States and there are information booths, networking, readings, etc. at local Pride Parades, for example, and activist walks along the parade. As an example, the mama bears were shown giving out free hugs with which they try to fill the gap that their own parents' turning away from their queer children has created. The documentary shows the activists giving hugs to people of different ages in different settings on and around the pride parade and in a bar listening to various people and responding to them with love and empathy, which is perceived as very positive by the people. In another scene, Sara Cunningham is shown at a wedding of two women where she takes on the role of mother to one of the brides because her own mother had distanced herself since her coming out and did not want to attend the wedding.

Apart from the families, the queer people portrayed say that, their families have turned away from them because they cannot reconcile their sexual or gender identities with their faith. Although the *mama bears* have experienced similar things, they continue to struggle and form an ever-growing community where faith is compatible with queerness. They have lost family members, friends and in some cases their church communities because they chose to accept and love their children as they are and refused the idea that their children's gender or sexual identity changes anything for their religious lives. Kimberly Shappley and her daughter Kai, for example, were shown getting ready to go to church on Sunday. *Mama bears* enables new friendships and communities to be found and strengthened, where everyone can pursue their faith, be themselves and be loved in return.

Since Liz Dyer's initiative, *mama bears* has evolved and there are now numerous Facebook groups, all of which can be found on the website. In these groups, mothers can be more specific and oriented towards the different needs of their children, e.g. there is a group for *mama bears* of autistic children (Double Rainbow) or for children under or over 18 (<18 #BeYou and >18 #BeTrue) (Mama Bears 2019). Also, several projects have developed out of the groups and activism, Mama Bears Safer Schools can be mentioned as an example. Those involved, who are not mentioned by name, have created a freely accessible flyer that gives schools five tips that can be used to create safer schools for LGBTQ+ children (Mama Bears 2019). For other contexts and especially for families, resources have been collected that recommend e.g. blogs or literature to find one's own way to unite Christian faith and queerness (Mama Bears 2019).

Queerness and Christian faith

LGBTIQ-friendly (self-help) groups fortunately do exist. What is distinctive in the documentary as a specific feature of *mama bears* is that they portray fundamentalist Christian families trying to reconcile their faith with their love for their queer children. However, if one visits the *mama bears* website, at first glance one encounters an organization that does not seem to define itself by its faith. Only hidden in the Resources-section of the website we find two links to "Fully Inclusive Faith Communities" on the one hand and "LGBTQ+ Affirming Wedding Officiants" on the other. At first impression, one might think *mama bears* are trying to find allies without particularly emphasizing the issues of religion and belief.

In an internet research for *mama bears* and Christianity, we find another bear community that also identifies as *mama bears* (mamabearapologetics.com). They call themselves *mamabears-apologetics* and overtly advertise Christian values. They aim to reinforce children's Christian faith in a "cultural war" we supposedly find ourselves in and want to prepare themselves for this so-called war, among other things, to encounter a non-Christian queer environment. They prepare their children for pride month, though,

to reinforce beliefs such as that affects between people of the same sex might exist, but that "romantic love" was designed by God between a man and a woman. The *mama bears*-apologetics teach their children to distinguish between a biblical marriage of the God-created male-female pair and a civil marriage, which in their view is not biblical if the couple is of the same sex.

It is obvious that these two organizations are ideologically at different ends. They differ in the way they understand Christianity as queer inclusionary or not. It is not the place to analyse here how their argumentation works; it's just striking how differently they emphasize Christian values and faith on their websites. We are left with the question: Why aren't Liz Dyer's queer-friendly *mama bears* putting the focus on faith more strongly? A list of LGBTIQ-friendly churches and one of officiants who marry same-sex couples are maintained. But the initial contradiction that parents experience between their faith and the queerness of their children is not mentioned to be loudly refuted in a second step highlighting their compatibility. Perhaps *mama bears* are thus reaching out to a larger community, as well as to parents who are not strictly Christian and who want to try to support their queer children. Or maybe they don't enter a battle over queer interpretations of the Bible because that could run in favour of other, queer-exclusionary *mama bears*.

At this point, we do not want to give the impression that these are similar organizations that only differ ideologically. Especially in terms of physical and material consequences, queer *mama bears* and their families are particularly unprotected. The consequences of the state's lack of human rights guarantee in the case of a trans child in the USA are shown in the following section.

Queerness and the state

On Independence Day 2022, Kai tweeted that her family was moving out of Texas (Shappley 2022). She wrote about Texas being "not safe for trans kids". In the message, Kai also referred to the historic date. The 4th of July is associated by patriotic US citizens with values such as freedom and independence. Kai saw her own freedom in Texas restricted to such an extent that she had to leave the state. She wishes a happy Independence day "to everyone who gets to celebrate that", implying that she could not celebrate this date.

Since leaving the state she was born in, Kai has described herself as a political refugee.

A year after the move, Kai tweeted that her family had moved to Connecticut in the north-west of the USA (Shappley 2023). She wrote that life there was more expensive than in Texas and set up a fundraising campaign to cover the costs of the move.

Kai also noted that her first school in C. was again transphobic. She concluded that transphobia exists in liberal states as well and that it is not just a Republican state phenomenon.

Kai's departure from Texas shows the dilemma faced by trans people in the USA. Moving is very expensive and not all trans people can afford it. It is important to remember that trans people are disproportionately affected by poverty. In a new state, they (or in Kai's case, her mother) have to find a new job and a new place to live.

However, anti-trans laws and hostile attitudes in parts of society (for example, among fundamentalist Christians) make it increasingly difficult to live in republican states. In order to ensure one's own security and the free development of gender identity, it becomes necessary at some point to leave such states.

Moreover, Kai's experiences at a Connecticut school show that liberal legislation does not necessarily improve the situation. Trans hostility can also come from the local school administration.

Since the release of the *mama bears* documentary, Kai has also embarked on a career as an actress. She guest starred in an episode of the Netflix series *Babysitters Club*, playing a trans girl. Her character arc closely resembles her own experience: a trans girl who is misgendered by adults around her.


She's been the subject of the Emmy-winning "them." documentary, and has been covered by Vice News and Time. Kai writes that she is planning more projects, but doesn't want to give specific details. Stay tuned.


The documentary is available at <https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/documentaries/mama-bears/>, but unfortunately not in Austria.

We hope that this forum contribution will motivate people to watch, research or support *Mama Bears*. It would be an enrichment to found similar groups and communities in Europe and Austria, or if they already exist, to give them the recognition and publicity they deserve.

References

crossroadsfestivalgraz (16. Mai 2023), Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CsTa8aeMxmD/?igshid=NjFiZTE0ZDQ0ZQ%3D%3D> (letzter Zugriff: 15.07.2023).

Kai Shappley HER/SHE  (4. Juli 2022), Twitter: <https://twitter.com/KaiShappley/status/1543973244105015297> (letzter Zugriff: 15.07.2023).

Kai Shappley HER/SHE  (4. Juli 2023), Twitter: <https://twitter.com/KaiShappley/status/1676192734195875841> (letzter Zugriff: 15.07.2023).

Mama Bears (2019): Mama Bears. <https://www.realmamabears.org/> (letzter Zugriff: 15.07.2023).

Mama Bear Apologetics (2016): "Train yourself. Equip your kids." <https://mamabearapologetics.com/> (letzter Zugriff: 15.07.2023).

mamabearsdoc (20. Juni 2023), Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CtuLXo7rUBj/?igshid=NjFiZTE0ZDQ0ZQ%3D%3D> (letzter Zugriff: 15.7.2023).

Jakob Fesca (no pronouns) has been studying International Gender Studies at Ruhr University Bochum since 2021. Jakob came to Karl Franzens University Graz for a semester abroad.

Jacqueline Schöttler (she/her) decided to pursue a double degree Master's programme after completing her Bachelor's degree in Childhood Pedagogy. She has been studying International Gender Studies at Ruhr-Universität-Bochum since October 2021 and started her semester abroad at Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz in February 2023. This forum post was also written during this semester abroad. She combines her two focuses of study in her current job as a student assistant in the research project "Children's well-being in socio-spatial contexts. Intersectional perspectives on children's experiences in non-school learning places (WIKK)" at University of Vechta and TU Berlin.*

Carla Camps Santasusana (she/her) is currently studying Gender Studies at the Ruhr University in Bochum. Her wage work is as a teacher of German as a foreign language in medical and dental courses. She is often in the water and likes to eat cake.